

“We Ate and Drank with Him after He Rose from the Dead”

- *Third Sunday of Easter*
- *April 22, 2012*
- *Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.*

During the five years I did graduate studies in spirituality in Rome I worked on weekends in the parish of the small town of Passo Corese in the Sabine countryside about half an hour by train from Rome. It was a one-parish town; everyone was Catholic; or at least they were supposed to be. The parish and town were ruled by the pastor, Don Simone. You had to love the guy, gray tweed hat and jacket, smoking a cigar, loving his people in a very rough and down to earth way, shaking them down by home visits and blessings of cars to keep the coffers of the parish full enough to support him, his brother, their housekeeper, and to slip something to me for helping out with confessions, Masses and feasts like Easter in my supposedly good Italian. Much revolved around food in that parish house. Much of the appearances of the Risen Christ also revolves around food.

On Holy Saturday the custom was that the children of each family in the town would bring to the parish for a blessing a basket covered with a white cloth with the food the family would eat at their Easter breakfast. I was on duty to welcome those wide-eyed, dark-eyed kids at the door of the parish house and to do special blessings for eggs, onions, bread, and jars of honey. The doorbell never stopped ringing all day long as Padre Stefano—that’s me—was there to do the necessary deed. Italians and food and Easter!

Sometimes a grown-up would come and ask for Don Simone. Something more serious was needed than what Padre Stefano could do. Don Simone would come back from the door headed to the wine cellar lugging liters even gallons of home-made wine or vats of locally produced olive oil. The people were supporting their pastor and parish in a special kind of expected collection. As he passed through the kitchen Don Simone would tilt his hat, twist his finger in his cheek and say, “Questo qua é un buon Cristiano”; or “Lui non é tanto Cristiano!” (This one is a good Christian; or This other one is not so Christian.) What he meant of course was this one brought good wine; this one not! This was his easy way of assessing their Christian commitment! Ah, Italians, food, wine, Easter!

I remember when our gospel of today was once the reading in the Easter season. It came to the point in the story when the risen Jesus says to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” They gave him a piece of cooked fish, which he took and ate in their presence.” Don Simone complained loudly to me, “Where’s the honeycomb!?” You see the text when he and I grew up was, “They gave him a piece of cooked fish and a honeycomb.” The Church realized that this honeycomb was only in the very late manuscripts, not the earliest ones, so they removed it. (You can imagine some Greek monk transcribing the bible and coming to a “piece of cooked fish” and saying “This will just not do; where’s the dessert?!” so adding “and a honeycomb”.) Don Simone was not about to tolerate this messing with the honeycomb. Whoever decided to remove it from the text was certainly not in his assessment un buon Cristiano! Again, Italians, food, and Easter!

It is remarkable how frequently food is at the heart of the descriptions of the appearances of the Risen Christ: he breaks bread at Emmaus; he eats fish (and perhaps a honeycomb!) here with the eleven in the locked upper room; he enjoys breakfast of fish and bread with some disciples on the shores of the Sea of Galilee; and when Peter testifies to the reality of Jesus risen and among them, he says, “God raised up Jesus on the third day and granted that he be seen, not by all, but only by such witnesses as had been chosen beforehand by God—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.” The Italians have got it right. What is this all about?

What it is about is that the witnesses and gospel writers are making a very clear and unmistakable claim that the Risen Jesus was not just really with them in some spiritual way, but was physically with them, that the risen body of Christ was physical! That’s the point of the bread broken, fish eaten, breakfast shared, and eating and drinking with them after he rose. Transformed as Jesus may have been, he still had his human physicality. This is the clearest way—the Italian way—of saying this was not some vision or hallucination they were having, not some sense of him being alive in them spiritually, not that he rose in their hearts, but that he was really, in the sense of physically, there; they could touch him, he could eat with them. This lasted only for a certain number of weeks; but it lasted in this real way for those weeks. The last to see the risen Jesus in this way was St. Paul who says: “Last of all he was seen by me, as one born out of the normal course.” What Paul means by this is that he was like one who was miscarried, that he was not readied to see the Risen Jesus as the others had been who had known him before his death.

The resurrection is the anchor of our faith. What that means is that we live by faith now, not by experience of Jesus physically. He really is alive, but we do not see him, touch him, eat with him physically eating and drinking among us. Of course he’s here but he’s here in faith and sacrament, really but reached by faith and reached by sacrament. And of course he’s here but not seen in the poor we serve in his name. If the resurrection were not true, were not a real resurrection, neither would our faith or our sacraments be true, would not be real encounters with him. How important then that the witnesses and gospel writers and Paul insist on Jesus really risen rather than spiritually risen. The food part of the accounts may seem minor details, but they are not; they attest to the unique, once-only, reality of the Risen One: only Jesus, only then.

When we say the resurrection is the anchor of our faith we also mean it in the sense that the anchor is on the land, on our physical land, or gripping the earth at the bottom of the sea. But the boat floats elsewhere. The Risen Jesus is the only one and only for awhile on our side of time and place who is already recreated, transformed, physically real as we shall one day be on this earth in our own resurrected life in the kingdom when the real Jesus will have come to raise us up as he was raised up. We shall be like him; so it’s important that he enjoys a physical human reality, is not a ghost as the disciples first feared till he ate with them, or else our future state would also be only like ghosts.

The witnesses in the room got it right; the gospel writer got it right; Paul got it right; the Italians got it right; wine-toting-hat-wearing-cigar-smoking-Christian-assessing Don Simone got it right. Maybe, just maybe, there was a honeycomb as Don Simone was sure there had to be for him and for the sake of his people bringing their Easter breakfast to be blessed. We can get it right now in our faith and certainly will later when we shall eat and drink with him in the Kingdom on this earth.