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Luke 24:36b-48  
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### An Easter Blessing

In Maryilynne Robinson's novel, *Gilead*, John Ames is a preacher nearing the end of his life. Listen to what Robinson says about water and blessing through the voice of Ames.

*There was a young couple strolling along half a block ahead of me. The sun had come up brilliantly after a heavy rain, and the trees were glistening and very wet. On some impulse, plain exuberance, I suppose, the fellow jumped up and caught hold of a branch, and a storm of luminous water came pouring down on the two of them, and they laughed and took off running, the girl sweeping water off her hair and her dress as if she were a little bit disgusted, but she wasn't. It was a beautiful thing to see, like something from a myth. I don't know why I thought of that now, except perhaps because it is easy to believe in such moments that water was made primarily for blessing, and only secondarily for growing vegetables or doing the wash.*

Many of the significant moments in our lives are marked by blessing. Pastors offer blessings to babies at their births and baptisms. The bodies of those who have died and the families and friends who grieve are given a blessing by the church. A house is blessed in the hopes it will become a home. A marriage is blessed after vows are exchanged. Graduates are blessed before entering the real world. Meals are blessed, that daily bread would become sustenance and service.

Blessings don't always come in traditional forms and they don't always work out the way we expect. At the church I served before I came to Duke, I blessed my senior pastor's dog one morning, and the dog promptly threw up on my boss's feet. My picture has appeared in the newspaper a couple of times while offering a non-traditional blessing, one time in the Raleigh News and Observer while blessing a child's hamster during our annual blessing of the animals' service. A woman wrote in to the paper the following week saying that picture gave her hope for world peace. A hamster, who knew? Several years ago, my picture appeared in the Charlotte paper while blessing boats on Lake Norman during the annual blessing of the boats – twenty dollars per boat per blessing. The money was given to a children's home in Croatia. The Catholics got in trouble several hundred years ago for selling indulgences. Now the Methodists call them "fundraisers."

The act of offering a blessing has deep roots in scripture. Throughout scripture blessings are given and received at significant moments in the life of God's people. God

told Abraham he would be the father of many nations, and his offspring would be a blessing, a sign of God's favor to all the nations. When Isaac was old and couldn't see, he wanted to offer his blessing to Esau, but Jacob tricked him, stealing his father's blessing, and the estate that came along with it. When Jesus had his final meal with his disciples before the crucifixion he took bread and wine and offered a blessing.

In today's gospel lesson, Jesus has appeared to his disciples one last time before he ascends to the Father and he is offering them a blessing. For their part, the disciples are startled and terrified at the appearance of Jesus. They believe they are seeing a ghost. When Jesus leaves he offers what the Father has promised, the blessing of the Holy Spirit, his on-going presence with them.

And this on-going presence is the key to understanding what blessing means. A blessing isn't so much something that is given; a blessing affirms something that is already there. A blessing isn't bestowing the favor of God; a blessing is affirming the favor of God that is already present. A blessing isn't giving the Holy Spirit. Rather, a blessing is recognizing that the Holy Spirit is already at work. A blessing is a way of saying the world is alive with the splendor of God, and a blessing helps raise our awareness of what God is doing. A blessing says to the person or people receiving it, you are God-created and God-breathed, you are a priceless pearl, you are beautiful, and you will never be alone. The image of the Father is upon you. The light of Christ is shining from you. The breath of the Holy Spirit is moving in you.

When Jesus enters the room, Luke tells us, the disciples were terrified. Jesus enters a room full of fear and hope. Blessings in scripture, and the blessings we give and receive in our own lives, often come at the intersection of fear and hope. A child is baptized and in that moment there is great hope, hope for the child's life, hope for the church, hope in the promises of God. But there is also a sense of fear or worry, fear that something will go wrong, worry over the daunting task of being a parent, and for all the challenges the child will experience in his or her life. The blessing in baptism says that no matter what happens this child belongs to God. The blessing over a marriage comes at the intersection of hope and fear. Hope for all that is to come, and fear at walking into the unknown country of "til death do us part." The blessing is the church's way of affirming the decision the couple has made, and the church's promise to support the couple in their life together.

I don't remember a previous academic year that has come to an end in the midst of so much hope and fear. It's not so much the hope part that is surprising. Hope is always present on campus in late April. Universities are built on hope, because universities are always looking to the future, and always assume things are going to get better, that this senior class is slightly more prepared than the last one, and the next a bit more prepared than this one, and so forth. But this year the hope is laced with a heavy dose of fear, or if not all out fear, certainly anxiety. Seniors are not only facing exams this coming week, and the difficult work of finding ways to say goodbye to friends and place, but many are facing the real possibility of having nothing to do after graduation. Jobs are few and graduate schools are full, leaving many a Duke senior to wonder what

comes next, making the future feel more like an enemy than a friend. And it's not only graduating seniors, or even students, who feel this way. Many of you perhaps live at the intersection of hope and anxiety.

Those early disciples were living in that place where fear and hope come together like waves and sand. These are the same disciples who had fled in terror during the trial and crucifixion of Jesus after pledging their lives to him. Imagine their sense of shame, their sense of failure, the sense of having abandoned the person to whom they had pledged their love in his time of deepest need. And now Jesus has returned. He comes to his disciples and offers them three things, all three connected to blessing.

The first thing he does is offer them peace. "Peace be with you," are the words Jesus says when he appears in the room. Blessing is recognizing the presence of God's peace. In their shame, he is saying to them, "You are still good. I love you. I trust you. I give you peace." The second thing he does is show them his hands and his feet. The resurrection is not a ghost or a metaphor. It is real. Jesus can be touched. The scars from the nails are still there. He has been raised in the body. Blessing is not offering a thin veneer of spirituality that hovers above the realities of real human life. Blessing is not a promise of health and wealth and happiness ever after. Blessing is a promise of God's goodness in the midst of our wounds, as Jesus shows his wounded hands and feet. And finally, Jesus eats with them. In almost all the post-resurrection appearances, Jesus eats with his disciples. His eating in their midst is an affirmation of his bodily presence. After all, ghosts don't need to eat, but it is also more than that. Food is not only about vitamins and calories. Like water, food is primarily about blessing, a daily reminder of God's grace and sustenance. Food is a gift.

I want to tell you a story of a place I saw blessing a few days ago. It was a place where water, peace, food, and goodness all came together. A couple of weeks back we received notice that Fred Phelps and members of the Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, Kansas would be coming to Duke to protest. Westboro Baptist has gained a lot of publicity in recent years for a great deal of meanness and hatefulness directed at gays and lesbians. They picket across the country at high schools, universities, and churches, and at the funerals of military service men and women. The language and gestures they use are stomach churching. The thought of Westboro Baptist coming to campus was frightening and infuriating to members of the LGBT community, and hurtful and upsetting to a larger Duke community that values inclusion and welcome across lines of difference. Our staff at the Chapel, and other members of the religious life staff on campus, felt some kind of response was necessary, a response that would point towards friendship and generosity rather than confrontation, so we extended an invitation to members and friends of the LGBT community on campus to come to the Chapel lawn at 7:30am on Monday morning – the same time the Phelps' crew would be protesting near campus. The idea was simple. We would eat breakfast together. No program. No speakers. No signs and chants or microphones. No confrontation, simply a meal that we would share as a sign of friendship and support.

On Monday morning at 7:30am it was pouring down rain. Now it is the rare student who is up at 7:30 in the morning, let alone on a rainy Monday, and so those of us organizing the event assumed a few people would straggle in for a bagel and a cup of coffee and the whole thing would be done by 8:00. Instead, at 7:30, students started to stream across the quad, through the down-pour, and began lining up on the Chapel steps. We ushered them in from the rain, set up tables filled with food in the narthex, and then sent them into the pews to eat. The rain kept falling and the people kept coming, students, faculty, staff and Durham community members, and now instead of worrying about all the leftovers we were going to have, I started sending people out to get more, and began wondering how Jesus did that thing about multiplying loaves and fishes. Hundreds of people joined in, forming the most unlikely alliances, gay and straight, conservatives and liberals and everything in between, Christians, Jews, Muslims and people of no faith at all, ROTC students and hippie students, coming in from the rain, pouring into the Chapel to share a meal together.

This past Monday morning Duke Chapel was at its very best, and inside there was water, food, peace, hope overcoming fear, and people, some of whom imagined they'd never be welcome in a church, were welcome, filling the pews, eating together, laughing, and enjoying one another's company, strangers becoming friends. An artist could have painted a picture of the scene and called it, "The heavenly banquet."

And while that meal was at full throttle, with the rain still coming down outside, you know what happened? Jesus appeared again in the midst of that meal, in the midst of all his children and said, "Bless you, bless you, my peace be with you."

Amen.