

For most of my priesthood I've understood Easter as the season
to focus on the bodily resurrection of Jesus.

Not Easter as mystery or metaphor, but his body, risen.

You might recall me touching on this topic in the past (“It’s all true!”).

But in my fervor for the resurrection of his body -

which, honestly, is not so much about the importance of Jesus’ body
as it is about the importance of yours -

maybe in my fervor I sometimes forget my own words - It’s ALL true.

All of it is true. The bodily resurrection but also the mystery,
also the metaphor, the symbolism, the POETRY of Easter. It’s ALL true.

And today is a good day to focus on the mystery of Easter.

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After the resurrection two of Jesus’ followers are met by a stranger,
and after spending the day together,
this stranger takes bread, blesses and breaks it...and disappears.

Even stranger, as soon as he disappeared,

the two men realize the stranger had been Jesus all along.

If that’s not a mystery then I don’t know what else to call it.

And it got me thinking:

What are the moments in my life when Christ was most real,
most present to me in the breaking of the bread?

What are some of the most important communion memories I have?

I want to share a few of those memories.

Hopefully, they’ll shake loose a few memories of your own.

Oh, one caveat: some of you are in these stories
and my memory is getting less reliable every day,
so if I get any of the details wrong I hope you'll forgive me.

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The first communion memory that came to mind
was from my last year of seminary.

Our class was invited to a beautiful retreat center in Connecticut.
We were all starting to think about the future,
about the next step after seminary.
On the last night we walked through the snow to a tiny, stone chapel
and we made eucharist by candlelight.

Our chaplain led the service and my friend Donovan played music
in a way I've never heard before or since.
He loosened his guitar strings so that they sounded almost like a sitar
and he played "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silent."

Jesus was present there that night: in the snow and candlelight,
at that moment in our lives, in our looking to the future,
in the vibrations of the music, in the breaking of the bread.

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Sometimes it isn't about the future.

Sometimes Jesus helps you reconcile with your past.

A few years ago I took a Sunday off from Holy Trinity
to worship at my family's church, Oak Grove Baptist.

It was Communion Sunday there and I went because
after years of finding my own journey with Jesus,
I was finally ready to be reconciled to the church
that had first taught me about him.

What struck me the most that day was seeing with fresh eyes
the devotion and care those deacons showed
as they prepared the bread and wine.

WE were the liturgical church, I had thought. THEY use shot glasses!
But I learned that day that even though our sacramental theology
was very different, the devotion and reverence were the same.
And Jesus WAS there, reconciling me to the people I had left behind.

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Sometimes Jesus is present in times of incredible beauty,
and for this one I'm remembering our 2018 All Souls service.

It was Will's first All Souls here and he pulled out all the stops.
Our choir was joined by Natalie Twigg, by 8 string players,
and by the choirs of Decatur Pres., Philadelphia Pres.,
St. James UMC, and Just Voices.

The only thing we forgot to add that night was a time limit.
It was glorious, and long, and hot and sweaty and beautiful.

If you checked out mentally, the service probably felt like it lasted 14 hours.
But if you hung in there with it, you were blessed in a special way.

At communion, when all those choirs and all those people in the pews
started singing together...
when "Abide with me" flowed right into "It is Well With My Soul..."
surely the presence of the Lord was in this place.

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Sometimes Jesus is present with you at the end of a great journey,
and here I'm remembering the communion Andrew & I had
at the end of our camino across Spain.

I was 45 and he was 15.

For 2 1/2 weeks we walked and walked
and somehow we didn't kill each other doing it,
and when we got to the Cathedral of St. James
they were celebrating the mass, and...
it was the day for the Botafumeiro.

If you haven't seen it, look it up on YouTube,
but until then picture a thurible just like this but as big as me.
Picture it suspended on giant ropes and swinging 75 feet in the air
from one side of the cathedral to the other.
And picture a father and son completing a life-changing journey
and finding the real presence of Jesus there to greet us.

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The most powerful communion memories
are often about being with people as death approaches.

I remember a woman in Rome named Starr Smith.
She was a Southern mystic who prayed the rosary and called on the saints
while she listening to the Gaithers sing gospel music.

At age 60 her lungs had failed and she was in the hospital...
fully awake, fully alert, and aware that she would die
as soon as the machines stopped breathing for her.

Together, Starr and her children and I prayed the litany
for ending life-sustaining treatment, and then we had communion.
I dabbed a little wine on her lips as she said goodbye to this life.
Christ was present that day, present to Starr and Jimmy
and Holly and Kathryn, and to me, too.

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And I remember the summer of 2017 when in the course of 7 days
we lost Kerry Abraham to a fall down her stairs,
Barbara Thompson to Alzheimers, and Steve Bishop to cancer.

I remember being at Emory one day, having communion in the ICU
with Kerry's family as they came to accept
that there was no brain activity,
then going to another floor to see Steve and Ellen
and having communion with them
as the awful truth of his cancer was slowly being discovered.

There was a lot of grieving that week,
but we didn't grieve as people who have no hope,
because we knew Jesus WAS with us that day,
the real presence of Jesus was there, even in the face of death.

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And sometimes Jesus is present in a way you don't understand until later.
That happened for me this week when I learned
Arleen Edmiston had died.

Arleen and I were close.
I hadn't really planned on that
but it turned out I didn't have a lot of say in the matter.
The last time I saw her alive was on Easter Day.

She came up for communion and after I gave her the bread
she grabbed my arm and pulled me close.
She said, "Give me a blessing. Father, I need a blessing."

I blessed her and kept on going. It was Easter morning.

After the service I went to my sister's house
and she went to lunch with her close friend Steve Clark,
and that was the last time any of us saw her alive.

What's funny is that I totally forgot about her pulling me in close
and asking for a blessing until after she had died.

I was looking at the video of Easter morning and that's when I saw it.
That's when I knew.

Jesus had been right there with us in that moment,
but I hadn't realized it until later.

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I hope I never stop talking about the bodily resurrection of Jesus.

I hope I never stop believing in it.

It's too important, too beautiful, too central to our Christian hope.

But his resurrection is more than just his body.

It's also mystery and hope and memory and reconciliation.

It's poetry along with doctrine.

Resurrection is also the real presence of the risen Christ

among the people who make eucharist, who make thanksgiving,
the people who share the bread and wine in his name.

It's ALL true.

Amen.