Nu`uanu Congregational Church

Third Sunday of Easter

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“COME, AND HAVE BREAKFAST” John 21:1–19

One of my favorite movies of all time is the 1987 Danish film *Babette’s Feast*. This film tells the story of two elderly and extremely pious Christian sisters, Martine and Philippi, who rejected suitors in their youthful years in order to conform to the austere, humorless and lifeless religion of their father, who founded his own Christian sect in a remote village on the Western coast of Denmark. It is the mid-19th century. The beginning of the film is filmed in black and white, and so the predominate color of the houses and streets is gray. The color matches the religion practiced by the town’s inhabitants. The father of the two sisters is dead, and it is their responsibility to carry on his constricted and austere religious legacy. The church’s members have aged. The young have no interest in the church, or even staying in the village.

About fourteen years earlier, Babette, a young woman, appears at the door of the sisters with a letter of recommendation from Martine’s former suitor, an opera singer in Paris. She is a refugee from counter-revolutionary bloodshed taking place in Paris, and she asks the two sisters to take her in as their housekeeper. The two sisters do so, and Babette begins to make life easier for them and the other villagers. She is a bright spot in an otherwise dreary village. In the beginning, we do not know exactly what she did in Paris before she came to the village. One thing we do know, however. She has a friend in Paris who buys one lottery ticket for her each year.

The story gets interesting when Babette wins the lottery of 10,000 francs. Instead of using the money to return to Paris and her lost lifestyle, she decides to spend it by preparing a lavish dinner for the sisters and their small congregation on the occasion of the founding pastor’s 100th birthday.

Babette orders all the ingredients for the dinner from Paris. The dinner itself features turtle soup, buckwheat cakes with caviar, quail in puff pastry shells, salad featuring Belgian chicory and walnuts, a cheese dish with papaya, figs, grapes, pineapple and pomegranate, and for dessert a rum sponge cake with figs and glazed fruit. Rare wines, expensive champagnes and numerous spirits accompany the food. This is surely a match for the feast described by the prophet Isaiah when all the nations shall stream to God’s holy mountain, and share “a rich feast, a feast of choice wines, of select foods rich in flavor, of choice wines well refined.” (Isaiah 25:6) Babette also purchases the finest china, crystal and linen for the table. Such gourmet French cuisine requires nothing less than the finest of everything.

What we love about the film is the reaction of the pious Christian villagers to all this food and feasting. At first, the members of the congregation are skeptical. They promise to each other that they will maintain their strict and austere attitude, and that they will not allow themselves to really enjoy the feast. But things begin to change during the preparation of the food. The streets of the village brighten up, and the film begins to reveal more and more color as the camera focuses on the foods.

The only one who can comment on the food is the old boyfriend of one of the sisters, Martine. He has come to the village to visit his aunt, and because she is a member of the congregation, he is invited to the dinner. As each dish is served, he comments on the food and says that it reminds him of the exquisite cuisine of the famous “Café Anglais” in Paris. He says that the only person who could prepare such a dinner must be the former chef of the Café Anglais, and sure enough, it is revealed that Babette herself is the famous chef.

During the meal itself, the faces of the members of the congregation begin to relax. They begin to smile. Their conversation becomes lively. Old loves are kindled and new resentments are forgiven. They experience joy for the first time in years.

For me, this film is a story of resurrection, a story of transformation, and redemption. Babette’s feast breaks down the villagers’ distrust of one another and their superstitions. The feast serves to replace their dreary religion with a joyful and exuberant faith, and we witness a mystical and mysterious redemption of the human spirit.

The film reminds me of our Gospel story for today from the Gospel of John. It too is a story of resurrection, of transformation and redemption. The original Gospel probably ends with the previous chapter, and what we have in Chapter 21 is an addition to the Gospel. But it is an addition that we cherish, for Chapter 21 is perhaps the most beautiful chapter of the entire Gospel. In Chapter 20, Mary Magdalene and the disciples witness the risen Jesus, but Chapter 21 reveals the real change that comes about with the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Please notice something. Resurrection is not resuscitation, a restoration of the past. Resurrection is something quite different. Resurrection is something new. The resurrected Jesus is the same, yes, but he is also someone different and not easily recognized. The earthly Jesus has become the resurrected Christ.

The story begins with the disciples fishing. As has happened so many times in the past, they fish without success. Nothing is caught. Every fisherman knows the feeling. As they come into shore, Jesus appears at the side of the sea but they do not know it is Jesus. Jesus calls to them, “Children, have you caught anything to eat?” They answer him, “no.” Then he instructs them to cast their net on the right side of the boat, promising them that they will find some fish. Sure enough, they catch so many fish that their net begins to break. What was bleak has now become lively, much like the lives of the villagers in *Babette’s Feast*, and what was scarce has become abundant, what was dead has become alive.

It is not Peter, who represents the named leader of the church in Jerusalem, but the beloved disciple (remember him?), the one Jesus loved, who announces, “It is the Lord.” When Peter hears that it is the Lord, he wraps his coat around himself and jumps in the water to go ashore, and the rest of the disciples follow, hauling their tremendous catch of fish behind them. The storyteller reports that there are one hundred and fifty-three fish.

As they reach the shore, the disciples see a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and some bread. Jesus invites them to put some of their newly caught fish on the fire. Then he says, “Come, and have breakfast.” And during breakfast, he breaks bread and gives it to them. And he does the same with the fish.

They enjoy a feast there on the shore, a feast with the risen Jesus. How wonderful. The new life of the resurrection is theirs to celebrate and enjoy. Truly, this is a story of transformation. It represents the beginning of a conversion for Peter. He is the one who jumps into the ocean in order to reach Jesus. Later, his restoration as a human being will continue as Jesus asks him whether or not he loves his Lord, and saying, “yes,” Jesus then commands him to feed his lambs, tend his sheep, feed his sheep. Jesus then tells Peter what will happen to him. He will be taken to a place he will not wish to go. He himself will be crucified. Then Jesus says to him, “Follow me.”

The transformation of Easter begins with Jesus initiating the transformation. Jesus calls Mary in the garden to newness of life. Jesus calls the disciples to shore, to come and have breakfast. Jesus then calls Peter to his restoration.

The risen Jesus calls to us, to leave behind the reality of death and despair, the darkness and dreariness that lies within and around us, and enter to the new life and joy of Easter. We think of the terrible dreariness of the Christianity of those villagers in *Babette’s Feast* and the disappointment of the disciples in the story from John’s Gospel when they catch nothing. Resurrection changes all that. Resurrection sets us free to find joy in life, to find joy in forgiveness, to find joy in simply being together. Resurrection opens up everything that has been restricted. Resurrection sets us free to be fully alive. It was St. Irenaeus in the second century who said that “the glory of God is a human being fully alive.” That’s the difference Easter makes. Resurrection is all about transformation, redemption, conversion. Easter sets us free to become human beings fully alive. That is what happens to the villagers in “Babette’s Feast.” They become fully alive. That’s what happens to Peter and the disciples in the presence of their Risen Lord. They become fully alive.

I trust that this is what also happens to us. Dare we let go of our serious and dreary religious life, dare we let go of the death and despair that permeates our lives and live in the joy of resurrection? With the poet E. E. Cummings, dare we sing?

*i thank You God for most this amazing*

*day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees*

*and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything*

*which is natural which is infinite which is yes*

*(i who have died am alive again today,*

*and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth*

*day of life and of love and wings: and of the gay*

*great happening illimitably earth)*

*how should tasting touching hearing seeing*

*breathing any--lifted from the no*

*of all nothing--human merely being*

*doubt unimaginable You?*

*(now the ears of my ears awake and*

*now the eyes of my eyes are opened)*

These poetic words could well be a commentary on the film *Babette’s Feast*, on our Gospel story for today, and on every story of transformation and conversion, including our own.

Thank God for the new life of the resurrection, the new life that God offers us this day and every day of our lives. Jesus invites us still, “Come and have breakfast.” Let us say “yes” and join the feast. Amen.