

# Broken Bread - and each other

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 30 April 2017

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Easter 3A

Psalm 116: 1-4, 12-19 (adapted); Acts 2:14a, 36-41; Luke 24:13-35.

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under "Sunday Reflections" tab

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The Emmaus story, set at the end of the day, began at early dawn when God breathed life into lifeless clay. When the women got to the tomb it was empty and they were told by angels or messengers (depending on which Gospel) that Jesus was risen. So they ran to tell the others. And in Luke's account it says that the male disciples thought it was an idle tale. But Mary Magdalene and the other women refused to shut up. They persisted.

But now the dawn was long past, the day was nearly over. Two disciples, one who we've never heard of, and one who wasn't named at all. Probably it was Cleopas' wife, whom I'm going to call Mary (seems a safe bet, considering that every second woman in the story seemed to be Mary)...were walking on the road to Emmaus, talking with a stranger. Now we know that it was Jesus because the narrator has told us. But they had not yet read Luke's gospel. So they didn't know who this stranger was.

And so now we are seven miles from Jerusalem and many hours past dawn. Stay with us, they urged the stranger. Stay with us because it is nearly evening and the day is almost over. So he went in to stay with them. And suddenly the guest becomes the host. He takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it and gives it to them. They know that it is Jesus and he vanishes from their sight.

*(Preacher moves to communion table and breaks bread, raising it so all the congregation can see, and places the pieces back on the table.)*

And there they sit at the table with pieces of broken bread and each other. And somehow, they knew that Jesus had come to stay with them even though he had vanished.

*"Were not our hearts burning within us when he opened the scriptures to us on the road?"* That same hour, that late and dangerous hour, they got up and returned to Jerusalem.

Did you remember, as you heard the story, what time it is? They had urged this stranger to stay with them because the day was almost over. By now it was over, and night had fallen. This was no time to be going back to Jerusalem or anywhere else in the dark. Surely, they could wait until morning when it was safer? But this is not just about the time of day. There are a thousand rational reasons to suppress resurrection...

So here we are, nearly two thousand years later...Jesus' people, left with pieces of broken bread and each other.

Break broken and shared.

Resurrection faith is not about wispy spirits or ethereal ghosts. It is a material, embodied faith. We eat and drink. We feed. We forgive. We become who we are to be in community through a shared meal. This eating and drinking shapes us as a people. We are what we eat...what we share... together. Bread nourishes our body. Story and relationship nourish our spirit.

This story of a faith, of an encounter on the road to Emmaus, is a story of theological imagination, a story to feed us.

This story celebrates Easter. It invites participation. Whatever actual historical experience may lie behind the story, it is now an invitation to us, to join the meal and to join the risky, dangerous journey of embodying and practising resurrection.

The early Christians called the continued celebration of meals – ‘breaking the bread’; ‘breaking of bread’ - and it was motivated primarily by the needs of community, rather than establishing or remembering a priestly understanding of the last supper.

As I re-read the Emmaus story this year, I also thought about the people of Lismore, with whom I spent five days as a disaster recovery chaplain the week before Easter. Some of the people, whose houses were flooded through their high basements and more than a metre high into their living spaces, lost everything. The broken, muddy evidence of their lives was piled up on the footpaths waiting for the Lismore City Council to take it all away.

Many of the people I spoke with were already doing it hard. They told stories of poverty, illness, violence, and struggle. I realised, as I listened, that as much as I offered care to them, what was really healing for them was me reminding them, and them reminding themselves, that they had persisted before and they would again. That in all that life brings they are not alone.

In the response of the community, in offerings of volunteer labour, furniture and food donated, cooked and shared, there was resurrection in the town

So for me, the Emmaus story is not just about the institution of Holy Communion. Wherever bread and wine, or congregational brunches, or meals are shared in homes or cafes or in a disused railway station that became a Disaster Recovery Centre, these meals become body and blood. Our body and blood.

Since the beginning of time, people have shared food as a sign of and a reaffirmation of their relationship...

Through hearing the scriptures, and sharing this meal with Jesus, Cleopas and Mary, felt an urgent calling to risk their lives, travelling by night, in the darkness, to reconnect with the community in Jerusalem, to testify to resurrection. Even when it would have been far more sensible to wait until morning.

My friend, Barbara Lundblad, retired preaching professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York, says they were crazy to venture into the night.

She says: Because night has fallen, they could have said: *There's nothing we can do. The problems are too overwhelming.*

Just as we note, on this Sunday, that there is war, there is poverty, there is racism against indigenous and migrant peoples, there is religiously justified homophobia. How often have we said: *"there's nothing I can do". I'll save my safe place?*

On ANZAC day a young Muslim Australian, Yassmin Abdel-Magied caused outrage when she wrote in a face book post *"lest we forget Manus Island and Nauru, Palestine and Syria."* On a day when we remember the futility of war, she dared to ask Australians to remember the victims of wars that we have aided and abetted in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East, which have created millions of refugees, numbers of which the world has not seen since the end of World War 2.

Yesterday, it was one year since Omid Masoumali died from injuries from self-immolation on Nauru, in an act of hopeful despair. He died to bring our attention to the violence that continues to be done in our name.

The criticism of Yassmin was selective and racist. The nationalism and boozy patriotism of ANZAC day have received critical comment from many quarters.

One of my friends, who lives in Rozelle, wrote this on her Facebook page describing what goes on in Balmain/Rozelle each ANZAC day. She wrote: *"Ahhhh the Balmain/Rozelle peninsula on Anzac Day...so much respect and solemnity that the Public Order and Riot Squad is out in force before 2pm. Later we will have the joys of vomit and urine in the streets as late night revellers screech platitudes about "Lest we forget". Thoughts turn to my late uncles who fought in WWI and WWII and returned home too traumatised by the experience to ever speak of what had happened for the rest of their very long lives, and for whom ANZAC day was a time to quietly spend with those they had shared the horrors with and to mourn the lost ones. About what was happening in Balmain, she said: They wouldn't get this."*

Another friend wrote sarcastically *"if only Yassmin had organised a wet tee shirt contest."*

But she didn't, she lived dangerously speaking the truth about the ongoing horror of war, not to deny the memory of Australian soldiers who died in war, but to also remember how war still damages and destroys lives. And in particular, how we are punishing men, women and children whose only crime was flee from persecution and war.

Like Cleopas and Mary, on the dangerous road back to Jerusalem in the night, she was crazy. Crazy to raise her brown, Muslim head above the parapet and raise her voice believing that she could make a difference. Believing that it is not futile to live resurrection life. That it is not futile to resist. That it is not futile to persist.

I thought also of US Senator Elizabeth Warren who recently spoke against the nomination of the southern racist Jeff Sessions as US Attorney General. Elizabeth Warren was silenced by the Senate Majority Leader, Mitch McConnell, as she attempted to read the words of Coretta Scott King opposing Sessions' nomination to the Supreme Court decades earlier.

McConnell later said of Warren, *"She was warned. She was given an explanation. Nevertheless, she persisted."*

Resistance and persistence are ways of living that the bread and wine of shared meals, framed by the story of Jesus and his friends, can inspire us. They can inspire us to be crazy in living lives that make a difference.

On the plane coming back from New Zealand last night I watched a movie I'd been wanting to see called "Loving." It is the story of Mildred Jeter, a black woman, and Richard Loving, a white man, who fell in love in Virginia and married in Washington DC in 1958. In 1959, they were sentenced to a year in prison for the crime of living in an interracial marriage in Virginia. The sentence was suspended on condition they left the state for twenty five years. They owned an acre of land in Virginia on which they'd hoped to build a house - and all their family were there and yet they had to move to DC where they had three children.

Mildred was desperately unhappy away from family and rural life and so they returned to Virginia six years later, living under the radar. The ACLU eventually took their case. Public exposure risked further jail time, but they too persisted, for nine years until in 1967, the Supreme Court overturned their conviction and all the anti-miscegenation laws throughout the American South. Marriage was declared a constitutional right. The Loving vs Virginia case was cited in the 2015 Supreme Court decision Obergefell v. Hodges, which established the right of same sex couples to marry.

When I think of the long road to marriage equality in Australian law and in the Uniting Church, I remember the crazy risk-taking love of Mildred and Richard Loving, a poor rural couple whose love and persistence changed a nation and changed the world.

And I hope that when the history of Marriage Equality in Australia and in the Uniting Church is told, they will say about the people of Pitt St Uniting Church: "*they persisted!*"

One of the scenes in the movie showed Mildred, in her living room in DC, watching Martin Luther King Jr leading a civil rights march. It was this that inspired her to write to Attorney General Bobby Kennedy, and he referred their case to the ACLU.

Martin Luther King Jr was called crazy not just by racists but by liberal whites who told him to slow down; who told him not to oppose poverty and war but to stick to civil rights and race. So he re-claimed the label crazy for himself. He said that while being a well-adjusted person was admirable, there are some social realities to which we should not adjust.

He said: "*...I never intend to become adjusted to segregation and discrimination. I never intend to become adjusted to religious bigotry. I never intend to adjust myself to economic conditions that will take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few. I never intend to adjust myself to the madness of militarism, to self-defeating effects of physical violence...*"

*It may be that the salvation of the world lies in the hands of the maladjusted. People as crazy as the prophet Amos who in the midst of the injustices of his day could cry out in words that echo across the centuries, "Let justice roll down like waters."*

As maladjusted as Jesus who said *love your enemies, pray for those who curse you, and bless those who persecute you.*

Resurrection happened and it happens still when we resist and persist, claiming life and love as God works through us.

Being crazy for justice, and living in hope towards the commonwealth of God, is in our bodies and in our bloodstream because we have eaten the bread of life, and we have heard the story of Jesus whom the powers that be could not suppress.

So, on this Sunday, hear again the Emmaus story, which is our story.

Here we are with pieces of broken bread and with each other.

*At that very hour, they got up and they went back to Jerusalem, filled with bread and resurrection.*

So may it be, for us.

Alleluia!

Amen!