

INTRODUCTION

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Imagine living two thousand years ago in what today we call the Holy Land. A woolen tunic is fastened at your waist; palm bark sandals are on your feet. You find yourself standing on a grassy hillside, one person among a large gathering of men, women, and children. It's springtime, it's warm, and sunlight sparkles on the Sea of Galilee behind you. You feel a gentle wind—a faint echo of the violent gale that blew through last night. Because of the breeze and surrounding crowd, you strain to hear the words of a distant figure who lately has been causing quite a sensation. People have been buzzing about who he might be, given the miracles he's performed, the way he's gotten under the skin of the religious authorities, and his inspiring teaching, which is delivered with a power and authority never before seen. Some think he is one of the prophets of old, delivering a new message from God. Others wonder if he might be John the Baptist, risen from the dead after being beheaded by Herod, the local tyrant. Many are prepared to whisk him away and proclaim him king. A few dare to whisper that he might even be the promised Messiah. His name is Jesus.

The day before, you and thousands of others spent the afternoon listening to Jesus speak. Most of those with you were poor, and they had not brought food with them. As the day wore on, many began to think that perhaps it was time to return home. Stomachs were growling, attentions wandered, and a long walk back lay ahead. But then Jesus did something astounding: he took a handful of loaves and fishes from a little boy, blessed

them, and told his band of disciples to pass them out. Somehow, to everyone's amazement, there was more than enough for everyone to eat, and baskets were filled with leftovers. People were full, happy, grateful, and dumbfounded. They shouted with joy and praise, and some burst into song. It's no wonder that after Jesus and his friends left that evening, many in the crowd walked all night, trying to find them again. Including you.

Jesus was eventually sighted on the other side of the Sea of Galilee. And just as yesterday, you and all the rest now hang on his every word. He speaks of the loaves and fishes with which he fed everyone the day before, as they are still very much on people's minds. Given that stomachs are growling again, a second serving would be gladly welcomed. But then Jesus begins to speak of other food: a bread that never perishes; a bread that, if you eat of it, will allow you to live forever. Now everyone is really paying attention, as they've never heard anything like this before. A number of people cry out and beg Jesus for some of this bread. Others nod their heads in agreement. Excited whispers run through the crowd, until Jesus says something that stuns everyone into silence, making their jaws drop: that he himself is that bread of which he speaks and that bread is his "flesh." What's more, he insists that if anyone wishes to truly live, not only do they need to eat his "flesh," they must also drink his "blood."

Upon hearing this, many around you begin to murmur and complain. Some are shocked, others are confused, and quite a few are flat-out horrified. The Jews in the crowd know that they are forbidden to drink blood. Blood is essential to life, and since all life belongs to God, to drink it is sacrilege. And then there is the business of eating flesh. What on earth? What else could that be but cannibalism? A good number shake their heads in disgust. "This saying is hard!" they complain. "Who can accept it?" They shrug their shoulders and walk

away, disappointed that the inspiring miracle worker has turned out to be a madman. He'd filled their bellies, but they cannot stomach what he has to say.

The thought of joining them crosses your mind, but something holds you back. As you watch them walk away, you turn to Jesus, wondering what he'll do next. Will he run after those who have left, shouting at them to wait so he can explain what he really means? Not at all. Instead, after letting the crowds go, he faces and questions his close friends—the same ones who had passed out the bread and fish the day before. Do they also wish to leave, Jesus asks? Is his latest teaching just too much to take? One of them, a fisherman named Peter, speaks on their behalf. You hope he might say, "Lord, we understand completely what you're talking about. Eating your flesh and drinking your blood makes perfect sense! We get it! There's no need for you to explain." But he does nothing of the sort. Instead, he, too, like those who left, throws up his hands in frustration. "Where shall we go?" he wonders out loud. "You have the words of everlasting life." As you understand him, what Peter says to Jesus is this: "Even though we want to believe that what you're saying is true, we have no idea what you're talking about."

Peter and his companions are just as puzzled as anyone else about what Jesus said that day. Nevertheless, they have faith in him. He has certainly surprised them many times before, and this incident is simply another in a string of teachings and miracles that have left them scratching their heads. But for them, there is no turning back. They are too committed, even though at times they have felt overwhelmed and confused. They know that Jesus loves them deeply, in spite of getting frustrated with them now and then. They love him, too, as best they can, in spite of their hang-ups and fears. So they continue to follow him. And because they do, they will eventually come to understand what he means by eating

his “flesh” and drinking his “blood,” even though it will take them awhile.

They will gain added insight a year from now, in Jerusalem, while gathered in an upper room of a friend’s home. Along with tens of thousands of other pilgrims, they will journey to Jerusalem for Passover to remember how God freed their ancestors from slavery in Egypt. They will go there to celebrate the Passover meal as they have done year after year with their families since childhood. The rituals, the prayers—they are all comfortingly familiar. One always knows what comes next; there are no surprises. Except for that night. They will expect Jesus to say the traditional words they know by heart. But once again, Jesus will do something shocking. After he blesses and breaks the bread before him, he will say that it is his “body” and give it to them to eat. Then he will take his cup of wine, call it his “blood,” and pass it around for everyone to drink.

Even before this, the disciples’ minds will be racing that evening. They will recall that just days before, Jesus was welcomed into the city by a joyful, excited crowd. Nevertheless, he repeatedly insisted that he would soon be betrayed and killed. Fear and confusion will have gripped their hearts. Yet in spite of their feelings, they will surely recall that day by the sea when Jesus first spoke of his body and blood. When they eat the bread Jesus gave them and drink from his cup, they will likely have an “Aha!” moment and think, “So this is what he was speaking about!” They will understand a bit more than they had before. But there will still be so much they don’t understand; there will be so many things yet to learn. Jesus will know that, and he’ll say so. “I have much to tell you,” he will confess, “but you cannot bear it now.” They will indeed be able to bear it later. After Jesus has risen from the dead and ascended into heaven, their understanding of what Jesus meant that day about his “flesh” and “blood” will continue to grow. They’ve

always had faith. But their faith sought understanding. And so, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, they will come to ever-deepening insights about what Jesus said and did.

Like the disciples, we, too, have faith. We believe Jesus, but sometimes the things he said can leave us puzzled. That can be especially true of the Eucharist, the sacrament Jesus gave to us that one Passover night, surrounded by his disciples in that upper room. The Eucharist is a great gift and a priceless treasure, but it is also, at its heart, a mystery. A “sacred mystery,” as the Church has come to call it. And mysteries, by their very nature, can sometimes be hard to comprehend. That’s why we speak of things being “shrouded” in mystery. In the mystery of the Eucharist, we’re invited to take it on faith that ordinary bread and wine become the body and blood of Jesus. At times, this may seem difficult to swallow. However, through our faith which seeks understanding, we can chew over this mystery in our minds, and it can become much more digestible.

In seeking to understand the Eucharist, we can find help from Jesus’ friends, family, and followers—those who had a front-row seat to what Jesus said and did. As first-hand witnesses, they enjoyed a privileged perspective from which to appreciate the richness of the Eucharist. Since their time, the Church’s understanding of that richness has grown, and we are beneficiaries of that development. However, in order to grasp where we’ve gotten to today, it’s helpful to start at the beginning—with those who lived, prayed, and journeyed with Jesus. To see through their eyes, we can use our imaginations, just as we did at the beginning of this chapter. Using imagination to pray and understand our faith is a time-tested and saint-sanctioned practice in our Catholic tradition. It’s not about making stuff up in our heads. Instead, it’s about using one God-given gift—the

imagination—to appreciate another God-given gift—the Eucharist.

Through imagination, we can join the apostles at that final Passover meal, what we today call the Last Supper. With the Bible as our guide, we can join them on other occasions, too: at the foot of Jesus' cross, outside his empty tomb, on the dusty road to Emmaus, at Jesus' feet as he proclaimed the Good News. There isn't an event in Jesus' life that we cannot share, thanks to imagination. However, Jesus did many more things than were recalled in the Bible. The Bible itself says that. And that's even more true for those who lived alongside Jesus. In the Bible, some were simply mentioned by name; they were part of the group but weren't singled out from the crowd. But the crowd remembered them. Stories were told, and in some cases, legends were created. All of this tradition has been passed down to us. It has helped us understand who these people were and why we honor them with reverence and devotion. It can also feed our imaginations and help us appreciate the treasure of the Eucharist.

In each chapter of this book, we will take the place of a specific friend, follower, or family member of Jesus in order to consider a particular aspect of the Eucharist and hopefully grow in gratitude for this gift. We live some twenty centuries later, and we weren't fortunate enough to have been eyewitnesses to all Jesus said and did. In a sense, we stand on their shoulders. Yet that doesn't prevent us from also standing in their sandals, seeing through their eyes, coming to know what they knew, and growing to love what they loved.

Questions

for Journaling, Contemplation, or Conversation

- 1) What elements of the Eucharist do you find confusing or mysterious?

- 2) Does imagination play a role in your life of faith? In what ways?

Stop and Pray

Bread of Life,
My faith in you seeks understanding.
Help me use the gift of imagination to better understand
the gift and mystery of the Eucharist, that I might be healed,
strengthened, consoled, and united with you and my brothers and sisters.
Help me become the saint you call me to be.
Amen.

Going Deeper

John 6:1-15	Jesus Feeds Hungry Crowd with Loaves and Fishes
John 6:16-21	Strong Winds on the Sea of Galilee
John 6:22-59	The Necessity of Eating Jesus' Flesh and Blood
John 6:60-69	Reactions to Jesus' Teaching
Mark 14:12-26	Jesus Observes Passover with His Disciples
Mark 11:1-11	Joyful Crowds Greet Jesus Upon Entering Jerusalem
Mark 9:30-32	Jesus Predicts His Betrayal and Death
John 16:12-15	Jesus Explains that His Disciples Have Much to Learn

1. CLEOPAS

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FOOD FOR THE JOURNEY

Who was St. Cleopas?

“Were not our hearts burning within us?” asked St. Cleopas of his companion after listening to a mysterious stranger who accompanied them from Jerusalem to Emmaus on the day of Jesus’ resurrection. At the end of that journey, the stranger was revealed as Jesus himself when he blessed, broke, and shared bread in Cleopas’s Emmaus home. Before this encounter, Cleopas may have been one of seventy disciples Jesus had called to prepare towns for his upcoming visits, and it is said that he was ultimately martyred for his faith in the very house where he had hosted the risen Jesus. Tradition tells us that he was the older brother of Joseph, the husband of Jesus’ mother, Mary, and that it may have been his own wife, also named Mary, who was his traveling partner on that first Easter.



The road is packed with travelers this day. With few exceptions, they are all heading in the same direction: away from Jerusalem and toward home, wherever that may be. A good number are prepared for long journeys

to far-distant destinations. They travel in caravans of oxen-pulled carts laden with provisions and passengers. Some ride donkeys while others walk. The cloaks they wear become blankets at night as they sleep on the ground in the open air. You, too, travel by foot. But you don't have far to go—only seven miles, as a matter of fact. Normally, this trip takes you just a few hours. Today, however, it seems to last an eternity as you shuffle with slumped shoulders, a head hung low, and a heart filled with grief.

As tradition requires, you had remained in Jerusalem for the entire feast of Passover: seven whole days. Friends had allowed you to stay with them, as it was next to impossible to find a room at a boarding house. Visitors from every corner of the world had so packed the city that it swelled to more than four times its normal size. Most came by land, but some arrived by ship. Like you, the vast majority were Jews, pilgrims come to celebrate the memory of the Exodus, when the Lord had freed your ancestors from slavery in Egypt. But there were others, too: merchants, thieves, curiosity seekers, and Roman soldiers on high alert for the slightest whiff of trouble.

You had been to Jerusalem for Passover many times before. After all, it wasn't that far away, and it had always been a joy to go. You loved the Lord and were happy to celebrate the wonders he had done for your people. You also enjoyed the sights and sounds of the city. The Temple ceremonies inspired wonder and awe, and the hustle and bustle of the crowds was exciting, even if the presence of Roman soldiers added an element of tension. When the festival ended and it was time to return to your village of Emmaus, you were usually sorry to leave, in spite of your exhaustion and eagerness to attend to duties back home.

This year, however, you are glad to put Jerusalem behind you. While on the road, you turn and gaze at

the city you have loved, numb with shock and bewilderment. The sky is beautifully clear and blue, but you hardly take notice. It doesn't seem to matter. Just days before, that sky filled with billowing smoke as priests burned the organs and entrails of thousands of slaughtered Passover lambs at the great Temple's high altar. One of those lambs had been yours. It had been perfect, without blemish, just as God had commanded. You and your companions had brought it to the Temple in the morning. A member of your party slit its throat, while a priest collected the blood in a bowl and then sprinkled it at the base of the altar where coals were burning. The lamb was hung on a hook, and the inedible parts were removed and placed on the altar. Finally, you left with the remainder of the animal to roast for the evening meal.

You ate it, of course, just as scripture and the ancient traditions commanded. But the festive air that normally accompanied this meal was missing, as the previous several days had been filled with danger. When you had first entered the city, you had followed behind Jesus of Nazareth, who you were convinced would be a great leader of the Jews. He was riding a donkey, as was proper for a king approaching a city in peace. Great crowds were shouting, waving palm branches and casting their cloaks before him, while Roman soldiers anxiously surveyed the scene and fingered their swords. And they weren't the only ones who were nervous. Certain Jewish leaders were enraged at this spectacle. "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!" they demanded. Others simply scowled with folded arms as they whispered sideways comments to their companions. On a few faces, you thought you glimpsed fear.

Tensions mounted in the days that followed, especially after Jesus caused a disturbance in the Temple by overturning moneychangers' tables and driving out the merchants with a whip. He was furious, and that in turn

made his adversaries even angrier. They tried to trip him up at every opportunity by tricking him into saying the wrong thing. Jesus was too clever, however. His wisdom shamed his opponents into silence and even won him some grudging respect. Nevertheless, they were undeterred and continued to plot to kill him. And since Jesus was a target, his followers would become targets, too. Jesus himself had acknowledged as much. "You will be hated by all," he had warned, "because of my name."

Gloom hung over your Passover meal like a pall. You went through the motions, doing what you were supposed to do, but it was all perfunctory. What should have been a celebration of liberation had been robbed of its joy. The wine you drank only added to your depression. Neither you nor your companions had any idea where Jesus and his apostles were that night. For all you knew, they might not even be in the city. You hoped that Jesus was safe, but you sensed that he was likely in trouble. After all, hadn't he insisted that he would be killed while in Jerusalem? You were scared for him. And you were scared for yourself.

The following morning, your worst fears were confirmed. Jesus had been arrested overnight and brought to the headquarters of Pilate, the Roman governor, to stand trial. While watching the proceedings from afar, trying to stay inconspicuous at the edge of the spectators, you wondered how it had all come to this. Until this moment, you had been convinced that Jesus was a mighty prophet, sent from God to save his people—your people. He had even chosen you and sixty-nine others to prepare towns for his coming by announcing the arrival of God's kingdom. You had done this with enthusiasm, and in gratitude, Jesus had promised that your name was written in heaven. But now there he was, a bloodied, beaten prisoner, standing in mute silence while the crowds jeered, demanding his death. Why did he endure this? He had healed the sick, walked on water,