

What Do You Focus On?

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Texts: John 21: 1-17



May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing to you Oh God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

A couple of years ago I received an illustrated book as a gift called “The Boy, the mole, the fox and the horse” by Charlie Mackesy. The book is full of ink drawings and watercolors of this young boy and his friend the mole, a little creature that burrows underground. They go on adventures together and meet a horse and a fox along the way. The author depicts scenes in the wilderness they are journeying through with different pieces of wisdom or conversations they have together scrawled in various spots on the page. I was flipping through it the other day and came across this exchange between the little boy and his friend the mole. The conversation goes like this:

“I’ve learned how to be in the present”

“How” asked the boy

“I find a quiet spot and shut my eyes and breathe.”

“That’s good and then?”

“Then I focus.”

”what do you focus on?”

“Cake,” said the mole.

These past two years it has more often than not been difficult to pause, breathe and focus on the present and what brings us joy with so many aspects of our world threatening our safety, whether that be the pandemic, racial injustice, gender inequalities, climate crisis, the widening wealth gap, or the brutal realities of war. It seems as if we have been in constant crisis management mode, asking ourselves: how do we get through this new tragedy? What is left once we do? Our brains are used to being in a mode of protection and survival and we are weary.

As the weather warms and we lean into the peak of Spring here in Boston, I've gotten back into a habit of mine to start the morning by taking 15 min to do nothing outside. I call it my nothing time. I've set up a comfortable chair in the corner of the small patio of my apartment with a colorful table beside it. The morning sun warms my seat for me and I take time to check in with my body, with God and with where my heart is at the moment away from my phone. Most of the time I try to find something that I'm grateful for, something that feels nourishing to me, and sometimes that is cake, like the little boy's mole friend, but more often it's the gift of breathing in fresh air and having a moment to be gentle with myself.

Can we try it together right now? Let's pause, taking a big breath in and out, feeling the air around us, sensing the love around us, and think of something that brings us joy, that spark of aliveness in our lives. Dwell in the joy for just a moment. And when you're ready, come back to the room. Thank you for pausing with me.

When presented with the lengthy narrative of Jesus' post-resurrection appearance on the beach it's hard for us to know what exactly to focus on. The disciples have just experienced the violent and public death of their dear friend and teacher, Jesus. Someone from their tight knit family is missing, he's gone, and their world has been changed forever. The grief is overwhelming. They might be asking themselves, are they even sure who they are anymore? And then, he starts showing up as they try to live their lives without him, and I've got to say, anyone who has lost a loved one could imagine that must have been a harrowing experience for everyone involved.

Shelly Rambo, a professor at the BU school of theology, in her book *Resurrecting Wounds: Living in the Afterlife of Trauma* reads the resurrection narratives against the experience of healing from trauma in our current time. She describes the experience of Jesus reappearing amongst the disciples as a time of in-between and transition. She says of Jesus, "he appears as one who is both familiar to them and yet unfamiliar, He appears to them as they once knew him and yet in ghostly form, as one who can enter a room through locked doors. From the gospel's account of Mary mistaking him for the gardener, to the Thomas encounter in which he makes his identity known by inviting Thomas to touch his wounds, resurrection is a period of disorientation and reorientation. He is both returning and ascending. He is both spectral and carnal."

Jesus must have known this, he must have been aware of their feelings that their world is being turned upside down and he provides a moment of grounding and orientation for them. This scene of the disciples finding Jesus on the beach, of Jesus directing them where to find the abundance of fish, of his uncanny ability to already have breakfast prepared and waiting for them, and his call to feed others too, points us to what might be important for us to focus on as we too attempt to wade through the past two years of crisis and of this time of disorientation and shared trauma.

At first, the disciples have a hard time recognizing the transformed body of Jesus in the days after his resurrection. At first, they did not know that it was him standing on the beach, but as soon as they got closer to him the first thing he says is “Come and have breakfast.” Jesus doesn’t jump right into updating them as to what is going on or explaining how he ended up mysteriously hanging out by the shore at the exact right time Peter decided to go fishing in the early moments of dawn. He doesn’t do any of that. He asks them to stop what they are doing and have breakfast with him, like they have many times before. The very next sentence is “Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, “Who are you?” because they knew it was the Lord.”

The disciples did not have a question in their mind that their Jesus would want to nourish them with something tangible and delicious, to take the time to reconnect, to feel the bread as they broke it together, to smell the aroma of the fish, to delight in this moment of pause and of reunion that they most craved, to restore their sense of wellbeing amidst the hard work of a post-resurrection world. This time that they took to be in the present moment together, enjoying what was there right in front of them, a simple meal prepared by their friend they thought they would never see again, a glimpse of hope that felt so far away not too long ago, is a part of the hard work of reorientation and resurrection.

This season of Eastertide gives us time to reflect on the birth of new life, of this interplay between our grief and woundedness and our healing and wholeness. Our scripture passage today calls us into that mystery of the risen Christ urging us to pause, experience something delicious, and experience joy as we make sense of our lives in a time of in-between. In other words, to lean into God’s grace for us. Not only does Jesus call us into making time to step out of our urgency and into our sense of joy to orient ourselves in this new world, but he calls us into providing that nourishment to others in our journey of discipleship. In his physical absence Jesus hands over this ministry of pause and nourishment to his disciples.

How might we answer this invitation of Jesus to come and have breakfast, to pause and focus on something that lights up our very being? And how do we share that nourishing joy with others in the midst of all we are holding? Maybe it's leaving all the dirty dishes out for an extra hour and having a dance party with your kids or roommates. Maybe it's making the extra effort to get to know your neighbors and cultivating your local community of care or choosing to feed yourself breakfast after struggling with disordered eating for way too long or being the person who doesn't walk away from someone else's pain when they share it. These small acts of kindness and moments of grace for ourselves and others weave resurrection into a world that can sometimes feel as if all it has room for is pain and despair.

Oftentimes the work of resurrection sounds so earth shatteringly consequential it must look like a sudden splashy reveal of healing or transformation. It certainly can be. But maybe, just maybe sometimes the work of resurrection lies in a refusal to be beaten down by the death that the world deals us. Refusing to relinquish our joy and our right to nourishment and grace in the face of our wounds. Part of the work perhaps is instead giving ourselves permission to pause and focus on the God-given nourishment that will sustain us in where we are called to be, a liberating truth that will help bring us back to a loving and authentic relationship with God, with ourselves and with our neighbor. May we answer the invitation to come and have breakfast and taste the sweetness of resurrection together. Amen.

