



# New Day Church

Need a fresh start?

## THE FIRST SUPPER

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Meghan Shea is a freshman at the University of North Carolina. She's a pretty typical student, majoring in biology, living on campus, joining a sorority. But Meghan's brain doesn't work like most people's. Probably the best way to explain it is to hear from Meghan herself. (Play clip)

That's the preamble to the Constitution, which Meghan is reciting backwards. But she doesn't just read backwards, she can actually carry on a conversation on the fly with her mouth going in reverse. And if she hears someone else reading backwards, her brain can translate what is being said. She first discovered this talent when she was in high school. A friend was talking to her on the bus when Meghan realized she could visualize each word backwards as she was hearing it.

I sometimes have trouble getting my mind to work forwards, let alone backwards. I could maybe read a sentence backwards slowly and with practice, but I wouldn't understand what was coming out of my own lips. I'm very sequential. I need things to happen in the right order or they don't make much sense to me.

So when it came time to plan the Easter service, I have to admit – the idea of ending things with communion felt backwards to me. It didn't make sense. I realize that for some of you from Catholic or other church backgrounds, you're used to taking part in the Lord's Supper every week, so it's nothing new. But here at New Day, this morning is a first. We only observe communion on the first Sunday of every month. And in all our seven years of being in existence, this is the first time Easter has fallen on the first Sunday of the month.

And initially, I was struggling with how to make it work. It felt backwards in my mind. Because communion is about Jesus dying for our sins. To start out the day by announcing that Jesus has risen from the dead and end up talking about his death seemed like reversing the timeline. Shouldn't it be the other way around? If we had a Good Friday service, maybe that would feel like a more fitting time to reflect on the crucifixion.

Plus, we have a lot of visitors on Easter who don't normally go to any church at all. For some of you, this is a strange experience and took all your courage just to walk through the door. Let me just pause a minute and say thanks for coming this morning. We're really glad you're here. I think you'll see that New Day is pretty casual. And we're

going to do our best today to make things like the Lord's Supper understandable and meaningful.

What helped me change my point of view was a story from the book of Luke that happened the day of Jesus' resurrection. In that story, a meal at a table became the turning point that allowed two people to grasp that Jesus was really alive. And it gave me a completely different perspective on the role of The Lord's Supper in understanding Easter. And I realized there's nothing backward at all about what we're doing this morning.

We're going to pick up the story this morning on that Sunday when Jesus rose from the dead.

### **Luke 24:13-35**

*Now that same day, two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him.*

*He asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?"*

*They stood still, their faces downcast. One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, "Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem and do not know the things that have happened there in these days?"*

*"What things?" he asked.*

*"About Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see."*

*He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.*

*As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus acted as if he were going farther. But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them.*

*When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"*

*They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, "It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon." Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.*

I just saw an article from the New York Times about the Last Supper. A new study just came out that looked at 50 paintings of The Last Supper from over the past 1000 years, and they found that food portions have increased by about 69%. Apparently we are even supersizing food from history now.

I don't know what's more interesting – that bit of trivia or the thought of someone getting out their ruler and measuring the little plates on all those pictures. I have no idea what motivated someone to do that, but it highlights the level of attention given to the Last Supper, especially this time of year. Every Easter, the media always likes to float some new idea about the meal Jesus shared with his disciples right before his death. People are fascinated by it. And it was incredibly significant, because that was where Jesus instituted the communion meal as a way of remembering him. And it's continued right down to today.

But I'd like to give a little attention to this other meal we read about that I call the First Supper. It's the first meal Jesus shares with anyone after his resurrection, and it becomes an event where he reveals that he is very much alive.

I love this story for so many reasons. I love the way we as readers are let in on a secret right at the beginning, before the people in the story know. And it's a happy secret, because we know that the overwhelming sadness these two people are experiencing is about to be turned on its head. You can't wait for them to figure it out. And the author does a great job of capturing their joy and excitement when they finally put the pieces together.

This is one of several stories that lets us know something was different physically about the resurrected Jesus. Somehow he didn't look quite the same as before. Even his closest followers would stare right at him without knowing who he was. Then something would click and they would see him clearly as if they had just woken up from a spell.

To me this adds so much credibility to the story, that they weren't making things up. Because if I was trying to convince people Jesus really rose from the dead, I for sure wouldn't admit that nobody recognized him at first. I would want it to sound like everybody knew beyond the shadow of a doubt when they first saw him that it was him. Why introduce questions that don't need to be there? The honesty of the gospel writers

only strengthens their believability that something amazing had happened that took everyone by surprise.

In a way, I'm glad it wasn't easy for the disciples, because it sets my own heart at ease to know I'm not alone in having trouble seeing Jesus sometimes. If they struggled the very first day Jesus was raised, it shouldn't surprise me when I struggle 2000 years later.

Put yourself in the place of the two disciples walking home that day. A week ago, you were watching your close friend and mentor get a hero's welcome as he rode into town. He looked like he was destined for greatness. Then you watched in shock and horror as everything unravelled and he was whisked away to a brutal death. You saw the unthinkable as his best allies betrayed him and denied knowing him. You sat huddled in fear behind a locked door as rumors flew all over town. The craziest rumor just surfaced this morning, because some of the women were all hysterical that the tomb was now empty. What's going on?

The seven mile trip home from Jerusalem was not enough time to process everything that had happened. You're confused, tired, discouraged and ready to get back to your own bed. Then this stranger who seems clueless about what has been going on the past few days wants to engage you in a conversation.

So they end up walking and talking for an hour or two with the now risen Jesus, totally unaware that it's him. I could have called this sermon *The Blind Side*, because they could not see Christ, even though he was right beside them.

How often do we go along, completely blind to the presence of Jesus, when he's walking right next to us? Spiritually speaking, we believe that that's true – that he's right here. If I'm a Christian, I have Christ present with me in a real way all the time. But we don't always live like that's true. And I am convinced that our inability to see him causes the vast majority of our problems. Because if we knew the resurrected Lord was standing right here, would we still feel so fearful about our circumstances? If we truly felt like he was with us, would we still commit that sin we think no one sees?

You can imagine how differently that conversation would have gone for those disciples if they had recognized Jesus right away, and you can imagine that the same would be true for us. We'd all get to the joy part a lot quicker. But it doesn't seem that simple.

Whenever you can't see something – anything really -- it's generally for one of three reasons. Either you're not looking, or something is blocking the view, or you're looking for the wrong thing.

### **Not looking**

If you ever drive past me on the road, you can wave all you want, but I won't wave back. It's a bit of a joke in our family. My kids will say "Dad -- did you see that cool car that just drove past?" And my answer is always the same. "No, I missed it." Or Karin will say, "Oh Kim just walked past us," and I'll be like, "Oh really?" When I'm driving, I'm

in the zone: hands at ten and two, eyes straight ahead. I don't see people or interesting sights because I'm not looking for them.

These two disciples weren't looking for Jesus as they walked down the road. Why would they? They still thought he was dead. The possibility of encountering Christ on the road hadn't even occurred to them.

We go through most of life without expecting God to show up. We're focused on just getting through the day to day activities in front of us. But if we're not really looking for God, it shouldn't surprise us if we don't see him.

### **Something is blocking the view**

Sometimes it isn't a matter of not looking – it's the fact that something is getting in our way. The other night at dinner, Annika said, "Whoa! Look at that rainbow!" And everybody else in the family turned around, looked out the window and started talking about how huge it was. Except for me. I couldn't see even part of it, because of where my chair was. The wall was completely blocking my view.

For those disciples, the wall standing in their way was their own grief. They were in so much pain and bewilderment over what had happened that they couldn't see who was right in front of them. There was this barrier of emotion that preoccupied them to a point where someone else trying to speak into the situation was pretty much just an annoyance. Who is this guy who doesn't seem to know what's going on?

What kind of walls block you from seeing Jesus? Maybe you're dealing with grief and pain that shuts down your ability to recognize God. Maybe you've built your own wall through choices that say "God keep out." Maybe it's a wall of anger over what God hasn't done for you in the past, or what he has let happen without giving you any reason. Maybe it's the wall of feeling pretty good about yourself without needing God's help. Why look for him if you don't need him? Or maybe you've had a few bad church experiences or bumped up against people who have been hypocrites, and even though they're not God, they're still blocking your view of him. We all have barriers and blinders that get in our way.

### **Looking for the wrong thing**

One other reason we can end up not seeing something is if we're looking for the wrong thing. Have you ever looked at those I Spy books? They might tell you to look for a mouse, so you start looking. You see a horse, chicken a duck, a rabbit and half the animal kingdom but no mouse. Just when you're ready to throw the book away, somebody else in your family comes along and says, "It's right there behind the boat," and points to a computer mouse. It was right in front of your face, but you couldn't see it because you were looking for the wrong thing.

I go back to what those disciples said to Jesus:

*The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel.*

Death did not fit in with what these two individuals envisioned Christ to look like. Their idea of what it meant for God to redeem Israel was more political or military. They wanted to be free from Roman control. And because of their expectations, they were looking for the wrong things in a Messiah. So all they could see was their own disappointment with Jesus.

Philip Yancey wrote a book called *Disappointment with God*, and as he was writing it, he said, “I found that for many people there is a large gap between what they expect from their Christian faith and what they actually experience.”

Our own expectations of God and what his activity looks like can be the single greatest challenge to our being aware of him in our lives. Because if we’re looking for one specific thing from God and it’s not there, then even if God is showing up in another way, it won’t register with us as being him.

So there were some legitimate reasons why it was hard for these two disciples to recognize Jesus that day: They weren’t really looking for him, there was some baggage blocking their view, and they had some faulty ideas in mind of what they would have wanted to see in the first place.

For all their blindness, these disciples had also been given several types of proof that seem on the surface like they should have convinced them that Jesus was alive. I call them the three “E’s” – evidence, eyewitnesses and explanation. First there was the **evidence**. The two disciples knew the body was missing. The story had been checked out and verified. They may not have known what it meant, but they knew for a fact that the grave was empty. Everyone agreed on that.

They also had **eyewitnesses** -- the story of the women who were saying an angel had told them directly that Jesus was alive. These were women who they knew, who had spent as much time with Jesus as they had. There’s no good reason why they would make up this angel story. So you would think their experience would carry some weight.

But what should have been the most compelling of all was the **explanation** Jesus gave them as they were walking down the road. I’ve read many books that seek to clarify different points about Jesus’ death and resurrection. Many of them have been brilliant and incredibly helpful. I have to believe, though, that the explanation those two disciples got on the road that day was far better than anything I’ve ever read. Because it was coming from Jesus! If you want airtight reasoning for the resurrection, you can’t get much better than going directly to the source. He laid out for them not just the proof of it happening, but why it had to happen that way.

And yet, at the end of the day, even Christ’s own explanation wasn’t enough to convince them. They still didn’t get it. By the time they reached Emmaus, they were still skeptics.

I heard in the news a few months ago that there is now a new religion called the Church of the Jedi. It's totally built on the philosophy of the Jedi from the Star Wars movies. It's hard to see how someone can genuinely build their life around a fictional belief system scripted by George Lucas.

Sometimes people act like all beliefs are equally as flimsy. But Christianity is not an irrational faith. It has a firm intellectual foundation. The weight of historical evidence is on the side of the resurrection, and I can give you a stack of reading material that lays out the facts. And if you want to hear stories of people who have witnessed the power of the risen Christ in their own lives, terrific. I can point you to all kinds of people right in this room who can tell you what they know of the living Jesus. And if you ask me for an explanation of how and why all these events make logical sense, I can direct you to enough theologians and philosophers to satisfy your logical side.

It's all there. But, but -- just like it wasn't enough for those first disciples, that alone is not enough. Why? Because it's just data. Information may impress the brain, but it rarely moves the heart. And Jesus wants to give us more than information. He wants to give us an invitation. He is not just an idea or a force of the universe – he's a person who is alive on the other side of death.

This brings us to that moment at the table, Jesus breaking that bread. They persuade Jesus to not keep going but to stop and stay with them, which he does. But then he makes an unusual move for a guest. He takes charge. Here he is in someone else's house, stepping into the role of the Master of the Feast, offering them the food instead of the other way around.

*When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them.*

And it was at that very moment that their eyes were opened and reality came rushing over them. This was Jesus, and he was alive! And they knew it with a certainty that reached them at their core like nothing else had – more than his words, more than the empty tomb, more than the what anyone else had told them.

The first clue may have been the scars on his hands as he reached for the bread. Those marks spoke volumes. Jesus used those hands to make four simple moves: taking bread, saying thanks, breaking it and giving it. Simple and straightforward, but also deliberate. Because those were things the disciples had seen Jesus do before. And not just once, but multiple times. When Jesus fed the 5,000 in that spectacular miracle, here's how Mark describes it.

### **Mark 6:41**

*Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to set before the people.*

When the bread was blessed and broken, it became more than enough to feed everyone. Just two chapters later, Jesus feeds another large crowd, this time a group of 4,000. Again, Mark records his actions:

**Mark 8:6**

*When he had taken the seven loaves and given thanks, he broke them and gave them to his disciples to set before the people, and they did so.*

Seven baskets full of leftovers when it was all said and done. The broken bread was sufficient for all. And then of course comes the occasion freshest on everyone's mind, the Last Supper.

**Luke 22:19**

*And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me."*

Christ was trying to tell them that the bread represented his physical body, and the breaking symbolized the fact that he was about to suffer and die. As Jesus explained on the road to those two disciples, this was the way it had to be to take care of our sin. It wasn't an unforeseen, tragic end to his teaching career – it was the event he had been preparing for all along. And the work of saving the human race all came down to his time on the cross, where his body, that bread, was ultimately broken. So Jesus invested a great deal of meaning in the act of breaking bread and giving it.

Do this one thing in remembrance of me, he says. Do this to help you remember. Your memory will be jogged by this action. And sure enough, it is. That's what does it for those two disciples that day. Christ's living presence there at the table was finally recognized through the taking, blessing, breaking and giving of the bread. As the disciples receive it from his hand, he was giving them so much more than food. Suddenly, they see the one who is handing them not a hunk of bread, but his own life, broken and then multiplied enough to feed an entire hungry world. In that moment, the message shifted to something personal. In that moment, in their own setting, addressing their own hunger, they found the real answer they had been wanting all along.

You may be getting a little hungry about now, thinking about meals and that big Easter dinner that's waiting for you after church. But there's a deeper hunger going on in each of us. I'm hungry for forgiveness. I'm hungry for meaning in this life and hope of heaven when I die. I'm hungry to know the God who loved this world so much that he gave his only Son to pave the way for relationship. And Christ, the bread of life, is more than enough to satisfy that hunger.

If you're looking for Jesus today, wondering if he's for real, you're not going to find your answer in more facts, as good as they are. You won't see him through somebody else's experience. It won't even be through the eloquence and logic of a powerful sermon. Jesus is known when you step out in faith and open up your own heart to receive from him something personal. It's when you take what he's offering and say, "Yes. I need

this. Feed me. I need your forgiveness. I need your life. Don't keep going down the road – stay here. Come in and stay.”

In just a minute, we'll take part in the Lord's Supper, and I hope if you do, you'll be thinking about more than Jesus' death. Because the Master of the Feast is the risen, living Christ. He's the one calling us to the table, reaching out and offering us this meal. He takes it, he blesses it, he breaks it and he gives it. And he says let your memory be jogged as you once again receive bread from my hand. This is for you. My death was for you. My life now is for you, too. Let your heart wake up when you see me doing the same things I've done before. Let your eyes be opened to the reality of my presence with you as you personally come and take in that my sacrifice was for you.

The Lord's Supper is where information becomes invitation. Not that there's anything mystical or magical about the bread. It's just bread. But it says God loves you. His love is stronger than death. He can help you see him. He can knock down the walls in your way.

Are you wanting to know the Jesus who is alive today? Are you wanting to see and recognize his activity in your life? There's no better place to start than right here.