

In the Upper Room

DAVE BAST

If the words, “the Upper Room” conjure up an image for you of Jesus and his disciples, then you are probably a Christian. In fact, you have probably been a Christian for a long time; but the events that happened in that room on the last night of Jesus’ life on earth have been important to all Christians for even longer; so what do we learn from what happened in the Upper Room? Stay tuned.

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And Scott, welcome back as co-host once again. Today we are starting a new series of programs that will trace the events of Jesus’ last day. I am tempted to call it “24” because it is really 24 hours from Thursday evening until Friday evening on the last day of Jesus’ earthly life.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; it is amazing how much happens there and how many of all the threads of all of scripture come together.

DAVE BAST

In a way, you could say that this is the heart of each of the Gospels, as well, each of the four gospels, because they devote an inordinate amount of time and attention, really, to the last week – Holy Week – but especially building up to the climax of this last day.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Somebody once called the Gospels passion narratives with long introductions; in other words, the whole thing climaxes in that last week, in that last day leading up to the cross and the empty tomb, and everything that comes before that is very, very important – Jesus’ life and ministry – but that is where it has been going all along; and so we come now to the climax of it all.

DAVE BAST

Which is why the Gospels really are not biographies of Jesus. There are all kinds of gaps; all kinds of things we wish we knew; and even the ministry, John says, for example: There were many things that Jesus said and did, if I wrote them all there would not be enough room to hold the books; but it is this climactic day that we are supposed to focus on.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; the writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, they included what we needed to know to make sense of that cross. So, what they included from Jesus’ life, it was all prelude to understanding why he had to die; and in Mark’s Gospel, you know, Jesus keeps it a secret all along who he is. Every time somebody says: You are the Christ, Jesus says: Don’t tell anybody. Only at the very end when he dies the soldier at the cross says: That is the Son of God; and nobody tells him to be quiet because now you can say it because now you understand being the Son of God means dying on a cross; so it all leads up to these events.

DAVE BAST

Or you could look at John's Gospel, where Jesus repeatedly refers to what he calls his hour; and he says early in the Gospel: Well, my hour has not come yet – my hour is not here yet. It is this climactic hour, and when you get to the story of the Upper Room, which we are going to look at in some detail, it says Jesus knew that his hour had come...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

So that was the hour.

SCOTT HOEZEE

This is where we have been going – this is where we have been heading. All four of the Gospels talk about that last night – that meal in the Upper Room – the events that happened there: The foot washing and all the things we will be looking at; but it begins with Passover. It begins with this, the highest festival of Judaism – of the Israelite faith – of celebrating the Passover – remembering the exodus from Egypt – and that is what happened on that last night; that is why they were together in an upper room.

DAVE BAST

Right; and New Testament scholars actually, there is an issue on the day of the week here that I do not think we will get into in this program...

SCOTT HOEZEE

No, we probably do not need to.

DAVE BAST

For our purposes and for the sake of the tradition of the Church, it is Thursday – we call it Maundy Thursday – maybe we will say a little bit about that term a little bit later toward the end of the program; but Jesus has sent – if you remember the story – if you are familiar with it – he has sent a couple of his disciples on ahead into Jerusalem to prepare things for the Passover celebration that they are about to have.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it is so important to see that – we forget this sometimes as Christians – that the fact that it is Passover – the fact that we will see in a few minutes that what we now call the Lord's Supper emerges out of Passover. What that reminds us is something we sometimes forget. This is all one piece of the story of Israel; of what we call the Old Testament now; of everything God has been doing since creation – since the fall into sin – since the call of Abram – it is all one story. We are not starting a new story just with Jesus and the disciples; this is one big, grand story; the big drama of scripture; and it is a story we are part of now. It is continuing. So, the story – the fact that this is the Jewish Passover taking place here reminds us: This story is God's grand drama, and it is huge.

DAVE BAST

And I think it is important to Jesus that he links his death – what is going to happen with his suffering and death – to that older story of deliverance from Egypt, crossing the Red Sea, and the lamb being slaughtered and its blood applied to the doorpost...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

The whole story of the Passover, which is celebrated in this great meal; but here, now is the problem, and this, I think, is why as we read this in the New Testament, it kind of comes across almost like undercover, because Jerusalem has become very dangerous for Jesus.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is the last place he probably needed to be. I mean, it would have been a really good place to avoid.

DAVE BAST

Right, because by this time the power structure among the Jewish leadership has determined they are going to get rid of him...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, the die is cast.

DAVE BAST

And so they are actively looking for a means of killing him, and they have already contacted the traitor among the disciples, so they have that going; and so Jesus cannot just appear publicly – he cannot just stroll through the streets; and clearly they must have had some kind of meeting place; probably a wealthy follower of Jesus that may have had a larger home in Jerusalem, and this is where this upper room is.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is where they met and that is where they celebrated the Passover; and right, Jesus knew the danger of being in Jerusalem just in general; but he also knew how important it was that he follow through on his Father's plan. As you said a moment ago, Dave, his hour has come, and so they celebrate the Passover; and I love how he institutes the Lord's Supper from inside the Passover. You know, in the Seder, which is the Jewish word for the Passover meal, it always begins with somebody – usually the child or the oldest child of the family asking the question: Why is this night different from all others? And then the father explains the story of the exodus from Egypt; but in this particular story somebody could ask the question: Why is *this* Passover meal going to be different than every other Passover meal that has ever been celebrated? And the reason is going to be: Because out of it Jesus is going to bring a new sacrament that we call: The Lord's Supper.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

Welcome back to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And Scott, you just said before the break that Jesus institutes this new sacrament – this special meal for Christians – out of the Passover celebration, and they are still at table reclining, as the Gospel writers say, and the leftovers of the meal are there. There is a lamb carcass and there are bitter herbs and there is unleavened bread and there is wine; and Jesus takes a couple of these things and infuses them with a new meaning. Let me just read the familiar words. After offering a prayer of thanksgiving or blessing, which could very well have been the traditional Passover prayer: Blessed art thou, O God... and so on and so forth... he says,

“This is my body given for you. Each time you eat it, do it in memory of me,” and in the same way after supper he took the cup and said, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood poured out for you.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I wonder sometimes what were the disciples thinking? For them, this Passover meal – this Seder – the unleavened bread reminding them of how they did not have time to let the bread rise in Egypt before they had to leave; and the wine and so forth; it had a traditional meaning. They had done this all their lives. They knew exactly what to expect. They knew exactly what it meant; and then all of a sudden, Jesus picks up that bread and says... not this reminds us of leaving Egypt... he says, “This is my body,” and he takes the cup, “This is my blood.” Their jaws must have dropped open; their eyes must have been wide: What is he doing?

DAVE BAST

Just imagine this: Imagine you go to church next Christmas Eve and you gather for worship and the minister stands up and says: This is all about my birth. This whole story is about me. How would you react to that? Well, they had been prepared because it was Jesus; it was not just any old human being; but it is that sort of dramatic note. All their lives it was about what happened way back when, and now Jesus suddenly says: No, it is actually about me.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and it is going to stay about me and about what I am about to do; and so he does a new thing; but what is interesting to me – I always like this – is that the sequence of what happens here; so you think of the bread: Taking – thanking – breaking – giving. That quadruplet there, that four-fold movement there is all through the New Testament after this, but actually even before this it is a reminder of the sacrament and the presence of Jesus; even in the feeding of the 5,000 that happened before this upper room...

DAVE BAST

But when they tell the story in writing the Gospels, there are echoes of that four-fold act.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; they are very deliberate: He takes, he thanks, he breaks, he gives; and so they are saying: This is the Lord’s Supper. In the very end of Acts Paul is on a ship. It is going to go down. They are going to sink, but first Paul gathers the sailors, has a prayer, finds some bread, and then Luke tells us that Paul takes, thanks, breaks, gives; and we realize in the middle of the storm that is also the Lord’s Supper. So, this becomes a huge, huge symbol of the...

DAVE BAST

Right; running through the New Testament. You think of Acts 2:42, where it describes the early Church as being devoted to the Apostles’ teaching, to prayer, and to the breaking of the bread – there it is again; so it is again and again.

Here is the question, though: What did he mean, exactly? One of the sad ironies of the story of the Church is that there has been no more greater disagreement or division anywhere than over the meaning of the words, “This is my body.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

And sometimes that has come from the wider world. So, one of the earliest accusations against the early Christians by the Romans was that they are cannibals. Listen to them. Listen to how they talk. They eat the flesh and drink the blood of their leader; that is cannibalism, and that is immoral. So, the wider world misunderstood it, but even we in the Church, we have had a hard time knowing in what sense is it his body? We have had disagreements and disputes about that. So, it is supposed to unify us, but sometimes we get hung up on the wrong things, and it divides us, which is too bad; but clearly what Jesus was saying, obviously, since his body was still intact when he said it and held up the bread – he was not *literally* saying: you are going to actually, physically chew on my flesh; but symbolically, that is going to be the case. You will be fed by me; and the Church has known ever since: We must be fed in that way. It is not optional.

DAVE BAST

And I also think that there is a strong reminder every time we participate in this meal of the cross – of the death of Christ – because it is not just... getting back to that four-fold action that you referred to, I think it is crucial that we repeat those steps clearly whenever we are celebrating communion because it is not just the bread broken... Let me put it this way: He did not break the bread just so each of the disciples could have a piece.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, it was not just hospitality.

DAVE BAST

Yes; it was a reminder and a pointer to his body, which would be broken just within hours; and he poured the cup out as a reminder that his blood would flow – his blood would be shed, just as the sacrificial lamb in the Passover had to shed its blood. The Old Testament says repeatedly: The life of any creature is in the blood. It is representative of a life poured out; and that is what we are remembering in communion.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is what we remember. The other thing that we should maybe notice, because I think we all struggle with this maybe even a little bit more in the Reformed and Presbyterian and Protestant traditions, but we are remembering that, but it is much more radical than only just a memorial. John Calvin... I think a lot of people thought it was just a memorial, just a way to jog your memory and remember what happened to Jesus... but Calvin also said once: Faith is the mouth and stomach of the soul; and we really do, in a way that is completely mysterious and yet utterly real – we really do have a significant feeding from Jesus through the Holy Spirit every time we take the Supper; and so even some of the confessions in the Reformed and Presbyterian tradition say very radical things; that your body will die if you do not eat physical food, but your soul will die if you do not take the Lord's Supper on a regular basis. You absolutely have to have this. You are not just remembering; you are being nourished.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely; even though Christians have struggled to explain how this happens... and of course, on one extreme you would have the Roman Catholic view that the bread and wine actually change, although not outwardly, but they actually change into the body and blood of Christ. On the other extreme, you might have a view that says: No, it is just a memorial. It is just looking back. Our tradition has tried to take this middle ground that stresses the fact that it is a real receiving of Christ. When you come with faith... It does not happen just by going through the motions.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; it is a faith...

DAVE BAST

That is an empty ritual; but when you come in faith by the power of the Spirit at work within us, we actually receive Christ in a way that you don't in any other place – in any other way, shape or form. Sometimes, they would say, it is not that Christ's body comes down to the table, it is that we are taken up.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, that was Calvin's view – that we actually are spiritually transported to the right hand of God, where Christ is seated right now, and that really happens. That is amazing; and because it happens to all believers the same, we are united in our faith – we are drawn closer together as believers as well; which means – I sometimes think we forget this, too – but that means that through the loaf and through the one cup in which we are all one, we are actually... we have more spiritually in common, we are more united with Christians in China and Africa, even though we don't speak the same language – we have more in common with them than our next-door neighbor in case they are not believers. That is what the unity of the body is all about.

DAVE BAST

Yes, I really love this idea, and I think we really need to make more of this sacrament. God has given it to us for a reason. We are not just spiritual creatures; we are physical as well, and we need this sort of physical reminder of what we live by and what we live on; and what we live by and on is Christ – Christ who died for us; Christ who rose and is alive, and who has given us his Spirit to unite us with himself and with each other.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And in addition to that, to all the things that emerged out of that Passover that Jesus changed on the spot, there is another thing that John's Gospel tells us about in terms of what it means to be a follower of Jesus, so united with him in following his example. So, we will look at that incident that John tells us about after the break.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

Hi. Welcome back to *Groundwork*. I am Dave Bast, along with my co-host this week, Scott Hoezee; and Scott, we do not want to just leave it here with the discussion of the Lord's Supper because Jesus did something else. As John records it, there was something that happened after the communion service.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; typical of the Apostle John and his Gospel, he fills in a lot of details and gives us some information that Matthew, Mark, and Luke did not include; and we think John wrote quite a bit later than Matthew, Mark, and Luke; so he kind of knew what their Gospels looked like; so he filled us in on a few other things, including... You know, really, Chapters 13 through 17 – 14 through 17 of John, which many of us know are sometimes called the "farewell discourse;" Jesus gives a really long speech and has his prayer for unity for the believers. You know, we just talked about the unity that comes through the Supper; so he prays for that. I sometimes think this was sort of Jesus' long good-bye...

DAVE BAST

Yes, I like that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We always wonder, you know, if a loved one is going to die or we think about our own death someday, what would we want to say to our loved ones before we go? John 14 through 17 is Jesus' long answer: Here are the things I have to tell you before I go. He is coming back from the dead, but then he will ascend into heaven; so this is sort of... this is what you absolutely have to know.

DAVE BAST

And he begins it, not with words but with an act.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Deeds, yes.

DAVE BAST

A kind of acted parable that has captured the imagination of the Church through all the ages. He gets up from the table after supper, John says, and he takes off his outer garment, wraps a towel around his waist, takes a basin of water and kneels down to wash his disciples' feet. A pretty radical act.

SCOTT HOEZEE

A very radical act because, I don't know, I guess even today if I were faced with a room full of grown men who had been wearing sandals and walking around in the dirt all day the last thing I would particularly care to do would be to get down near those feet and wash them; and indeed, most people in that day did not want to do it either. This is what a slave did. This was an act of hospitality, but the master of the house did not do

it at all.

DAVE BAST

And it should have been done right at the outset; when they first arrived there should have been a servant there to greet them and wash their feet. Maybe the reason there wasn't was because of the security issue and the need for secrecy for their meeting together; but clearly none of the disciples decided to jump up and perform this act for the others. It waited until after the supper when Jesus himself does it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and you wonder... I sometimes wonder, did they kind of shift their eyes one to the other? Did they sort of say, you know... does Peter look at James and James look at John and so forth and say: Are you going to do it? Somebody has got to do it. Who is going to do it? And none of them do it, so finally Jesus stands up, and I would think they were a little embarrassed to realize he has finally... The Master – the Lord – the Rabbi – he is going to do what the rest of us... Nah, we didn't want to do it.

DAVE BAST

Yes; the Son of Man came, not to be served but to serve, as he says on one occasion. I also think of this passage in Philippians 2; you know that great Christ hymn that traces the kind of descent; and I see sort of a parallel thing going on here. It starts out, he did not consider his equality with God something he should cling to or grasp, but he emptied himself.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so what you have here with Jesus taking off, I guess probably not to put it too indelicately, but I guess he probably kind of stripped down to his tee shirt and underwear, as it were, and did this menial act for the disciples; and really what you kind of have there, and in that Philippians 2 passage and so forth – what you really kind of have there is the whole Gospel compacted down into this one act that the Son of the living God – the second member of the Trinity, we would now say in theological terms – became nothing for us. He became a human – he became a servant – he became humble, even unto the point of death; and all of that is right on display as Jesus picks up Peter's calloused, dirty foot and washes the dirt from between the guy's toes; and it is an example for all of us, he goes on to say.

DAVE BAST

Which is where they had this curious interchange that sort of brings something else out in this action; kind of the symbolic nature of it, I guess you could say, because Peter says: Well, I am never going to let you do this to me, Lord; it is not appropriate – typical Peter. He thinks he knows what is right and what is wrong; and Jesus says: Well, if I don't wash you, you do not belong to me; you have no part in me. So then Peter, of course: Well then, wash me head to toe.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, you have to let me do this, Jesus says. But, you know, I get it, I get it, because what is one thing that we often say, sometimes even in the Church today: I don't want anybody's charity; right? We would much rather bring the casserole to somebody who is sick than be the one who receives the casserole. We would much rather write a check to help somebody who is down on their luck and need money than receive the check. Jesus says here: Look, I have to do it all. You cannot do it. You need my charity. You need my love. You need my... I have to do this for you and you have to be humble enough to say: Okay, I cannot do it myself; O Lord, wash me.

DAVE BAST

Exactly; and then he adds that he has done this as an example for us. If he has done this for us, this humble act of washing, then what are we going to do for others? You know, he did not say... I like this quote of Oswald Chambers: Jesus did not say: I have had a most successful time on earth. I have addressed thousands and been the means of their salvation, now you go and do the same. No, what he said was: If I, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.

Scott Hoezee:

That sets the servant tone for the rest of the Church. Out of the Lord's Supper emerges this example of humility and servanthood, and that is what we do. That is how we are Christ one to another.

DAVE BAST

So, thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation, and do not forget, it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keep our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you think about what you are hearing, and suggest topics or passages you would like to hear on future *Groundwork* programs. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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