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Mealtime Habits of the Messiah

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Catering on Planet Earth

**Jesus said to them,
“Come and have breakfast.”**

John 21:1-14

Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Galilee. It happened this way: Simon Peter, Thomas (also known as Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. “I’m going out to fish,” Simon Peter told them, and they said “We’ll go with you.” So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus.

He called out to them, “Friends, haven’t you any fish?”

“No,” they answered.

He said, “Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.” When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish.

Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, “It is the Lord,” he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards. When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread.

Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish you have just caught.”

Simon Peter climbed aboard and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” None of the disciples dared ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the

same with the fish. This was now the third time Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

Jesus was killed because of the way he ate.” You’d be hard-pressed to find a cooler soundbite about the gospels than that statement by New Testament scholar Robert Karris. I so wish I’d thought of it first.

Compared to other biographies (except maybe those of famous gourmets and chefs) the gospels are bursting with meals and foods and daily bread. I’ll be your tour guide through many stories about Jesus, whether they include grub or not. I’ve carved up the book into four main portions, corresponding to different facets of Jesus’ life and work: (1) he was a teacher and more than a teacher; (2) he was a miracle worker and a healer; (3) he was a spiritual and radical guy; and (4) he was crucified and resurrected. It didn’t surprise me to find meals playing a role in at least one or two of the encounters in all four sections.

But this story, Jesus cooking breakfast in John 21, baffles me. I don’t know which of the four sections it belongs in. It’s a resurrection appearance, of course, but there’s also a miracle involved. Just under the surface, there’s a lot of teaching about community and spirituality; so take your pick, really. But with such a great story, it’s better to just drink it in than to take the time and energy to classify it. First stop, ladies and gentlemen, the Sea of Tiberias, aka the Sea of Galilee.

As the disciples return from an unproductive nightshift—*bam!*—there’s Jesus. Only, as frequently occurs in the resurrection appearances, they don’t realize it’s Jesus. Whenever there’s this lack of recognition, Jesus counters it not with words, as we would (“Hey, it’s me!”), but with some unmistakable *action*. (I’ll tell you about some of those other incidents later in the book.) With these fishermen, he reprises the net thing he did when some of the fishermen met him for the very first time (Luke 5:4–11). That does the trick. As if in replay of his first call, Peter leaves the boat and the nets and his friends behind, jumping straight into the water even though it wouldn’t have taken long to land the boat. And he swims this time; getting to Jesus doesn’t always involve walking on water.

When they get to shore, what do the disciples find? The risen Lord, master of time and space, who holds the galaxies in place and who knows all people's hearts and will be both the judge and the criterion on the last day.

And he's sitting there smoking 'em a few kippers for breakfast.

C'mon now, you've got to love him for that. If you read some of these so-called secret gospels, often written hundreds of years later by heretics who didn't really know Jesus, you'll find a risen Lord who is a glorious but ghostly oracle answering all their questions about the guardians of the seven heavens, the meaning of material reality and object-oriented programming languages. Not our Jesus. He's concentrating on turning over the pita bread to keep it from burning, just the way he concentrated on drawing in the sand in the "cast the first stone" story in John 8—unconcerned with the people around him, apparently. Yeah, right.

And then, just when we think he's going to look up and multiply his few fishes and loaves to feed all those disciples, we remember he's already multiplied fishes: their nets are full.

What comes next is the most amazing and gracious thing, and the bit I love the best. Jesus is frying fish. He supplied a miraculous catch. What does he do and say next?

He makes just the right number of fish levitate out of the net and directly into the pan, right? No.

He says, "Have some of these fish already in my pan"? Wrong.

"Bring me some of the fish I've supplied for you"? Nope.

Here it is. He says, "Bring some of the fish you have just caught."

Excuse me? The fish *you* have caught? What did *they* have to do with it? By themselves they caught nothing. And it took them the whole night to do it.

Want to know what Jesus is really like? It doesn't get much better than this. He wants us to bring "our" fish, "our" talents, "our" service, "our" faith. Never mind that none of these are "ours" except as a gift. But he's serious. He's willing to regard them as ours; he wants our gifts, generously crediting us with generosity.

Have breakfast with Jesus: BYOF.

Most of the other stories I'll tell you about fall more neatly into one category or another. Take the first section, "Teacher and More". Arguably the central theme of Jesus' teaching was the kingdom of God. On a number of

occasions he likened it to a huge dinner party with some surprises on the guest list. Also within the section on teaching we'll ask why Jesus didn't just say what he meant instead of beating around the bush with all these little stories and questions; we'll have a quick look at his most famous chunk of teaching; we'll investigate why he didn't have business cards with the name "Jesus Christ, Messiah, Second Person of Trinity" but used the ambiguous title "Son of Man"; and we'll spend some time thinking through the importance of teaching to Jesus himself and to the gospel writers. I'll even tell you just a little more than you wanted to know about the mysterious and secret document known only as Q. Shhh.

The miracle stories are probably the most fun, so this section is longer than the rest. We'll look at all manner of strange goings-on, including Jesus' somewhat tempestuous relationship with the Sea of Galilee. Back to our food and drink theme: there's the time Jesus lost some coins in the first century equivalent of a Coke machine and reduced it to a smoking heap of nuts and bolts, and the time he fed thousands of people on short notice with an inexperienced catering staff. There are also healings and exorcisms to examine, including a bunch of blind guys, ungrateful patients, a person who pops up from behind to siphon off some of Jesus' power, another who descends from above (through a hole in the roof), a guy whom Jesus healed of excessive body odor (though that was the least of his problems), and the time that Jesus could have quite properly said, "Go to hell", to a whole legion and didn't.

His radical spirituality involved Jesus in the main activity that Karris had in mind: having "table fellowship" with tax collectors and sinners. In those days, eating with people implied acceptance and a level of intimacy. In this section we'll also look at how Jesus prayed in public and in private, at his ultra-Jewish spirituality, and at his angry reactions and refusal to accept evil on the part of those who thought themselves holy.

Even more meals feature in the final section on Jesus' death and resurrection. There's the Last Supper, of course, but also the invitation to come in for a meal after the walk to Emmaus and a wonderful incident in which the risen Jesus materializes before the astonished disciples and asks, "Got anything to eat?" We'll also look at whether it would have been possible for Jesus to avoid the whole crucifixion business, how Pilate handled his tricky political situation,

and how the people who loved Jesus had as hard a time adjusting to his being back as they did to his being gone.

We've included the Scripture passages at the start of each "encounter". We've also put some thought questions at the end of each. Even if you don't find those particular questions helpful, let their presence be a reminder to take time to ponder and even pray about what you've read and how you might respond. Throughout this book, you'll see and hear a very human Jesus who spoke about and did supernatural things unlike anyone else who ever lived, but also a divine Son of God who shows up on planet earth and waits and cooks and eats.

Make sure you show up too. Make it a real encounter.

Come and have breakfast.

Suggestions for Further Thought

On the matter of fish that Jesus provides but reckons as ours, a friend once pointed out that we find it easy to pray and ask for prayer when we're doing something unusual, outside our competence. But how often do we pray for the routine, the things that we think we've got under control? What fish are you taking for granted?

Is God interested in the "fish"—the nouns—at all? Or is he only interested in the verbs—the willingness to give and receive?