

# To See the Future From the Upper Room

Exodus 12:1–14

Psalms 78:14–25

1 Corinthians 11:23–26

Luke 22:7–30

## Opening

Tonight we enter the Upper Room with Jesus and his twelve closest friends. Luke is the storyteller this year, our guide this Maundy Thursday. We are most familiar with the events of Maundy Thursday from John's Gospel, but this year we experience the Upper Room through Luke's story.

Tradition tells us that Luke was both a doctor and an artist, and there may well be more artistry in his storytelling than we perceive. Luke tells us Jesus' instructions to his disciples in Jerusalem: 'Look for a man carrying a water jar. He will meet you. Go to his house and say, 'The Teacher says to you, 'Where is the guest room?'

Maundy Thursday is not the first occasion our Lord Jesus needed a guest room near Jerusalem. When Joseph brought his betrothed, nine months pregnant wife, Mary, to Bethlehem, only 3 miles from Jerusalem, they searched for a guest room where the baby might be born. In Luke 2.7, our English Bibles record that "Mary wrapped her newborn son, laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn." But if we hear Luke's Greek word in this verse, he says, "No room from them in the *kataluma*, a guest room." The very same kind of room Jesus instructed his disciples to seek from the man carrying the water jar. 'The Teacher says to you, 'Where is the *kataluma*?'

If Luke was determined to call the place of Jesus' birth an inn or hostel, he would have used a different word.<sup>1</sup> But he was speaking of the customary guest room in a Palestinian home. I know this might change our picture of the Christmas story, but this is reading the whole Gospel story the way Luke wrote it. The Christmas narrative helps us see the Holy Week story.

Most Palestinian homes had a second story guest room, an upper room to offer hospitality for those in need. Our Lord was not welcomed into the guest room. He made his bed in a lower room, where animals were stabled. Our Lord's life began in great humility; he was denied even the most customary hospitality for guests. He came to his own and his own received him not. He took the lowest place from his earliest days.

## Christ the Servant-Host

Now gathering in the Upper Room these final days of his life, Christ enters a different *kataluma* and there becomes the Host. Christ, who entered this world in utter humility, ascends to the Upper Room. But even ascending there, he will descend again. Our Lord Jesus takes the form of a servant, kneeling at the feet of his disciples to wash their feet. Christ appears as a Host who serves.

On Maundy Thursday, we customarily offer space for the washing of feet, following the example of our Lord. But just as we refrain from sharing the common cup during this pandemic, so we will forego the ritual washing of feet this year. The story we enact in footwashing occurred when all of Jesus' disciples were gathered in the intimacy of the Upper Room. Our Lord Jesus washed *all* his disciples' feet.<sup>2</sup> If all cannot have the opportunity both to receive and offer the washing of feet, then we will wait until next year for this Maundy Thursday ritual.

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<sup>1</sup> In the Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10, the word 'inn' is different. Luke does not choose 'kataluma,' but 'pantochorein' for the inn of hospitality given to the wounded man.

<sup>2</sup> John 13.12

Our Lord Jesus gave us three mandates tonight—a new sacrament of his Body and Blood, a new commandment to love one another, and a new teaching on service revealed in footwashing. That’s how Maundy Thursday gets its name; Maundy from the Latin “mandatum” (mandate). Whereas John emphasizes the footwashing story on this day, Luke directs our attention to the institution of the Eucharist.

Just as the King of Heaven was born in the lowest place, so the man Jesus is the Servant who becomes the Host. He gathers his most faithful friends at table. Our English Standard Version in Luke 22.15 reads, “I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer.” But that ‘desire’ was much deeper. A more literal rendering would say “I have *craved* to eat this Passover with you before I suffer.”

See how the Lord loves the twelve in the *kataluma*. They have followed him throughout his mission to this point. “You are those who have stayed with me in my trials,” the Lord Jesus says to the twelve. And the mission will continue though they do not perceive the future.

When he takes bread, blesses, breaks, and gives it to the twelve, the future is opaque. Until this moment, they had been following a familiar Passover meal liturgy—a dinner with a story. The story of God’s deliverance of Israel from the final plague of Egypt. This was a night to remember the Exodus. Then Jesus takes the story in a new direction. This bread is my body. This wine is my blood. What does he mean?

This guest room, this *kataluma*, this Upper Room, was the place to prepare for the future. Jesus speaks about the kingdom after his suffering. He addresses the twelve saying, “I assign to you, as my Father, assigned to me, a kingdom.” What happens here—the Eucharist, the footwashing, the new commandment of loving one another—these actions and teachings are the three assignments for the future. They are the three will reveal the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

## Life After A Pandemic

We are thinking about the future, too. As the number of coronavirus cases rises in the U.S., we hear journalists and writers speculating about life *after* this pandemic subsides. Who

knows what our world will be like after these times? We do know this will be a defining experience of our lifetimes. There is no assurance this will be the only pandemic we experience. So we hear people preparing for a noticeably different world, maybe even a different kind of life, after this pandemic.

People are asking what this pandemic means for our health, our economy, our communities, our relationships, even our daily routines. And no one knows.

## Everything We Need

Yet I believe everything we need for an uncertain future was given long ago in a Palestinian *kataluma*, the Upper Room. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever." There were troubles behind them and troubles ahead, even after Jesus rose again and ascended into heaven. Yet the twelve faced their uncertain future consuming the Bread of Heaven and the Cup of Salvation. They faced the mystery of the future with the greatest, most powerful Mystery of all: Holy Communion.

We're living through troubles and more are bound to come. What they will be, we do not know. But this I pray we will learn in the present hour: how hungry we are for Holy Communion in all its fullness, shared together in person, united by Christ our Host. We are thirsty for the common cup; we long for its return in our worship. The Eucharist is the Mystery we need most as we enter the mystery of the future.

I pray that when we return to our familiar routines, we will not take for granted how precious Holy Communion is. Christ instituted this sacrament of his Body and Blood so that we would be replenished by his grace and love, in season and out of season. Thanks be to God for communion in one kind, for spiritual communion in these quarantined days. But let our hunger and thirst lead us to the Lord's Table with renewed devotion in the future. Video services are a blessing for these extraordinary circumstances, but there is no substitute for gathering in person at the Table of the Lord. How will you prepare for the future? We will need to know we are loved; we will need to receive tangible grace together. I pray that you embrace Holy Communion anew to enter the future.

After this same supper, we hear Jesus speak these final words from John's Gospel: "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, *for apart from me you can do nothing.*" <sup>3</sup> Oh, it is so true. "Apart from his grace, there is no health in us." <sup>4</sup>Without his grace, we will not love well, we will serve in our own strength and become exhausted. But consuming his grace, given in Holy Communion, we will not only have strength to love and serve one another, the joy of the Lord Jesus will be in us, no matter what the future brings, and our joy will be full. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> John 15:5, ESV

<sup>4</sup> BCP 2019, Morning Prayer.