

“The *Last Supper*?”

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason, Michigan

April 17, 2025

Maundy Thursday

For a very long time now, Christians have called the meal that Jesus shares with his disciples on the night of his arrest “The Last Supper.” The term “Last Supper” does not appear in the New Testament, and I have not been able to determine when the term originated. But the name “Last Supper” is very straightforward. The meal Jesus shared with his disciples shortly before he was arrested was indeed a *supper*. Actually, according to Matthew, Mark, and Luke, it was the *Passover* meal, the sacred meal that Jews would have – and still have – once a year to commemorate the Exodus from Egypt. They eat foods symbolizing aspects of the Exodus story, like bitter herbs to represent the bitterness of slavery in Egypt. The most important part of the Passover meal is the bread, specifically, unleavened bread, bread that hasn’t risen, because in the Exodus story the Jews had to depart in great haste and did not have time to allow their bread to rise. In Hebrew, this bread is called *matzah*. So, at the time of the Passover festival, Jesus and his disciples were in Jerusalem, and they gathered in an “upper room” to celebrate that meal together. Jesus knew it would be his last meal with them. When Jesus passed the bread around the table, to represent his body, it was this unleavened bread, this *matzah* bread, that had traditionally been used to commemorate the Exodus story. Jesus was imbuing it with a new meaning.

You all know what happens next; after the meal, Jesus goes to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray, and Judas betrays him to the religious leaders, and that sets off the chain of events that culminates in Jesus’s execution the next day. So that meal the night before was indeed Jesus’s *Last Supper*.

Or ... was it? Because it’s actually *not* the last time Jesus eats with his disciples. As we all know, just a few days later, God raised Jesus from the grave. Later on that resurrection day, Jesus appears to two disciples in a village called Emmaus, and Luke tells us that Jesus *sat “at the table with them,”* and that “he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.” That story is in Luke 24, if you want to look it up. Did the risen Christ eat anything at that meal? Perhaps not, because immediately after sharing the bread, Jesus vanishes from their sight. The two disciples hurry back to Jerusalem to tell the rest of the disciples, and then *Jesus appears again*. The disciples aren’t entirely sure that he’s *real*, so Jesus asks them, “Have you anything here to eat?,” and then “They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it *and ate* in their presence.” So Jesus is once again having a meal with his disciples. There’s also a story in the Gospels about Jesus having breakfast with his disciples, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, after his resurrection; that story is in John 21. It doesn’t specifically say that Jesus himself *ate*, but that’s kind of implied. So, by this way of looking at it, what we traditionally call “the Last Supper” didn’t turn out to be the “Last Supper” at all. Jesus then spent the next forty days with his disciples, “appearing” to them and “staying with them,” according to Acts. Presumably he kept eating with them. One could argue that Jesus’s *real* “Last Supper” was the last meal he shared with them prior to his ascension, forty days after his resurrection.

Or, there's another possible way of looking at this. The reality is that Jesus is present with *us, here and now*; that Jesus is present *whenever* two or three are gathered in his name, and perhaps *especially* when we celebrate communion. Jesus is with us as we have this meal tonight. So, by this way of thinking, Jesus's "Last Supper" *hasn't happened yet at all*; indeed, it won't *ever* happen, so long as there are Christians on earth who remember him, and eat this bread and drink this cup.

There's one more way of looking at this. Jesus's "Last Supper" could be considered to be the *heavenly banquet* that, we are promised, we will share with Christ when we "shuffle off this mortal coil" and take our place among the faithful departed. The concept of a "heavenly banquet" goes all the way back to Isaiah, centuries before Jesus, who wrote: "the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear." (Isaiah 25:6) There are several references to this "heavenly banquet" in the New Testament, particularly in Matthew's Gospel. It was also visually represented with great frequency in early Christian art. That heavenly banquet with Jesus will go on and on, to the end of eternity. We will dine with Christ *forever*.

So this supper that we will soon be sharing is a symbolic representation of Jesus's last meal with his disciples prior to his execution. But Jesus still dines with his disciples – with folks like us, with Christians far and wide, around the globe, of every race and people. Indeed, we will be having supper with Jesus *right here*, in just a few minutes. Christ is present with us *now* as we share this bread and cup together. Christ will be present with us *whenever* we do this in the future. And even after we are no longer walking on the face of this earth, we will *still* be dining with Christ, at that heavenly banquet. So this meal that we are about to share represents the *end ...* and yet, it doesn't. It also represents Christ's *abiding presence with us*, forever and always. We should be eternally grateful.

© 2025 Rev. Bill Pinches