

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
April 7, 2019

## **Getting Ready for Church**

Luke 22:7-13

As we get closer to Holy Week and Easter, we begin to anticipate some familiar stops on our journey with Jesus. His entry to Jerusalem. Gethsemane. The high priest's house. The Roman governor's residence. Golgotha. And eventually the empty tomb. But before we get to these sacred sites, there's another holy space that's worthy of a visit. In today's text, Luke's takes us there. It's called the "upper room" (v. 12).

Many Palestinian homes would have had such a room. It was basically an extra room built onto the flat roof of the house. It would have to be reasonably spacious to accommodate Jesus and his disciples. Cramming thirteen people into a smaller space would have been difficult, especially since their gathering involved a meal. And not just any meal. This would be a Passover meal.

The Passover meal, which launched the celebration of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, was an occasion to remember and rejoice in what God had done to liberate his people from slavery in Egypt, and to anticipate the future arrival of God's reign of righteousness and peace. This was no casual potluck gathering where each person showed up with something to contribute to the food and fellowship. No, the Passover meal was a much more structured experience that required an extra level of planning and preparation.

Food had to be assembled. That included preparing the lamb and the side dishes, and making sure that bread and wine were on hand. And don't forget the utensils. Make sure that one of the disciples has a key to the hospitality closet. All the appropriate supplies need to be in place. Things need to be done right.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. Having a menu doesn't really matter, if we don't have a location. When it comes to observing Passover, it's important to ask, "What?" It's important to ask, "When?" But it's also critical to ask, "Where?" That's actually the question that shapes Luke's narration of Jesus' gathering with his disciples. Once Jesus tells them to go and make preparations, their first response is, "Where do you want us to prepare for it?" (v. 9).

That's an understandable question. After all, Jerusalem was crowded at the Passover season, and the meal had to be eaten within the confines of the city. It wouldn't be easy to find a suitable spot. But Jesus is in control of the situation. The disciples need to trust him, and be assured that they'll have what they need.

Jesus tells them that as they enter the city a man carrying a jar of water will meet them. This would be an unusual sight. Usually, carrying water was considered women's work. This feature of the story, along with Jesus' specific instructions about following the man, and then asking the owner of the house about a guest room, has invited speculation that Jesus had prearranged the location privately, out of concern for safety and security. Remember that the story of the Lord's Supper comes right after the account of Judas agreeing to

betray Jesus. It's clear that some of the religious authorities perceive Jesus as a threat, and have plans to arrest him and kill him. So it's possible that Jesus has already made arrangements for the location, and kept that from his disciples, until now. At the same time, the details of Luke's account could simply be a way of communicating Jesus' foreknowledge of the whole situation. Either way, the emphasis is on the fact that Jesus maintains complete control of the events. What matters most is that God is present and working to redeem his people through the unfolding events of Jesus' suffering and death.

That's how we arrive at this place called the "upper room." This space has taken on a life and legacy of its own. In Jerusalem, there's a site on Mount Zion that many believe is the location of the "upper room." It's a much sought after destination for many people who travel on pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Though there's not universal agreement that this is the location of the "upper room" mentioned in today's text, that doesn't diminish the enduring significance of Jesus' gathering with his disciples. What he said and did in that upstairs space has filled the name itself with lasting meaning.

So much so that we apply the name to all sorts of places and projects. Google "Upper Room" and you'll find churches, ministries, worship bands, and publications that incorporate the name into their identity and purpose. Some of you use *The Upper Room* daily devotional guide. For over 80 years, that publication has encouraged people everywhere to share their stories of faith. It's now translated into more than 30 languages and can be found in over 100 countries. For many people, the term "upper room" has become synonymous with meeting Jesus in a deep and personal way, and experiencing spiritual transformation by being in his presence. No one leaves the upper room unchanged.

True, there was a lot in that room that was familiar. The table resembled what you would see in many upper rooms. The cushions were laid out so that guests could recline while eating. All the traditional Passover food items were prepared and all the utensils in place. Everywhere you turned you could see the results of planning and preparation. That's because meeting with Jesus didn't just happen. It took some getting ready.

None of us just magically appear here on Sunday morning. It takes time and effort to make it here to this place of fellowship with our Lord and with one another. Getting up, bathing, deciding what to wear, eating breakfast, getting into a spat with your spouse or a debate with your children, remembering to bring your Bible and your offering. You know what it's like to race against the clock on the Lord's Day. You know what it's like, in the most practical sense, to get ready to meet with Jesus.

And when you finally make it to your spot in the pew, and open your bulletin, you're staring at some of the results of planning. Music has to be picked and practiced. Scriptures have to be selected. Computers have to boot up. Microphones have to be adjusted. Worship leaders have to know their responsibilities. Ushers have to be lined up. A sermon has to be prepared. And on this first Sunday of the month, the Lord's Table has to be set.

One woman tells about a time when her daughter went with her to buy some grape juice for their church's communion service. After reminding her daughter that it was for the Lord's Supper, she put it in the refrigerator. Later on, her son saw it and wanted some. But the daughter scolded, "No, that's for God's lunch!"<sup>1</sup>

Remember that behind our Sunday morning rituals are lots of weekday rituals that pave the way for what we do when assembled here in the sanctuary. One of those rituals takes place on the first Saturday of each month, after the deacons meeting, when Geri Webb is in the church kitchen, patiently filling each cup with some juice, and making sure the bread is on

the plates. Let's not overlook her, and others who assist her, who help us make sure that the table is set and this upper room is ready.

I want to be careful, though, not to focus so much on what we do to get ready for worship, that we lose sight of the primary presence, the primary actor, in our Sunday gathering, the risen Lord himself. No one who comes to the table open to and hungry for fellowship with Jesus leaves unchanged. Those who ate with him in the upper room in Jerusalem would never be able to look at the Passover meal the same way again. Jesus took all their preparations for the meal, and all that they assumed was familiar to them, and transformed these things into a new ritual that was the fulfillment of and successor to the first Passover meal. There at the table, Jesus reveals himself as the offering, the Passover lamb, for humanity's deliverance.

The upper room is the place where Jesus proclaims how he's giving himself for our salvation. By doing so, Jesus not only launches a new ritual that we still observe, but also launches a new community, made up of those who occupy the upper room with him. I'm not saying that this sanctuary is the only place where we can meet our Lord and have fellowship with him. The presence and life-giving activity of God can turn all sorts of places into sacred space. But I am saying that the church, the faith community of believers, becomes the space, the upper room, where Jesus meets with us and speaks to us and changes us.

For all the emphasis in today's text on what the disciples need to do to make preparations in the upper room, the main preparation taking place in that space is what Jesus is doing to them. They've done what he told them to in order to get the table ready. Now, he's using the table to get them ready. He's preparing them for what's soon to come in his suffering and death. He's getting them ready for the opposition, hardship, and challenges they will face for the sake of the gospel.

In a world where the good news of the cross, and the way of Jesus Christ, are resisted and often rejected, he has given us his community and his table as sacred space where he can work on us, especially through his word. He can strengthen us and enable us for how we live in the present, and he can prepare us, get us ready, for whatever things we may experience in the future, especially things that will require sacrificial obedience for the sake of the gospel.

Some of you may be familiar with Leonardo da Vinci's painting *The Last Supper*. It's a mural on the wall of a church in Italy, depicting Jesus and his disciples in the Upper Room. But during World War II, this famous piece of art almost became history. On August 15, 1943, a bomb landed about 80 feet away. Thanks to sandbagging and scaffolding, the painting survived. In fact, it was about the only thing that survived. Most of the rest of the building collapsed. So maybe, as one preacher has suggested, we should take heart from this episode, as a reminder that this fellowship meal, and what it tells us about Christ's sacrifice for us, will endure and prevail. It's no wonder that as Jesus breaks the bread and shares the cup, he speaks about eating and drinking again when the kingdom of God comes. That's the Upper Room we're anticipating most.

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<sup>1</sup> Melanie Bell, Arlington, TX. "Small Talk," *Today's Christian Woman*.