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ARC 3 · STORIES ABOUT JESUS, 21–30

The Table

Ten stories about Jesus, fully prepped.

THE TEN STORIES

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> A few days before your table meets, learn the story the way hosts have always learned stories: **Recite, Retell, Recall**.

RECITE

Read it out loud to yourself a few times during the week.

RETELL

Say it in your own words with the text nearby to check yourself.

RECALL

Tell it with the text closed. That is it.

OR READ IT FIRST

Cannot get it cold? Read it aloud, close the book, tell it anyway — and ask the table to catch what you drop.

Twenty minutes across a week. Nobody is asking you to memorize a script — the five Cs are all you need to hold in your head, and every story here comes with them already worked out.

The sample telling is training wheels, not a script. It is told, never read — reading aloud makes a classroom, telling makes a table.

STORY 21 · THE TABLE

Water into Wine

Read it first: John 2:1–11

THE FIVE CS

CONTEXT

A village wedding in Cana — a multi-day feast, the biggest celebration a small town had. Jesus is a guest, with his mother and his brand-new disciples. He has performed no sign yet. This is where he starts.

CHARACTERS

Jesus. His mother, who notices the problem and simply expects him to handle it. The servants, who know the whole truth. The master of ceremonies, who knows none of it. A bridegroom about to be publicly humiliated.

CONFLICT

The wine runs out mid-feast — in that culture, a shaming failure of hospitality that a family would never live down. Mary tells Jesus. Jesus says his time hasn't come. Mary tells the servants to do whatever he says anyway.

CLIMAX

Six stone jars for ceremonial washing — twenty to thirty gallons each — filled to the brim with water, and dipped out as wine. The master of ceremonies tastes it and calls the groom over, amazed: everyone serves the good wine first; you saved the best for last.

CHANGE

A wedding is rescued, a family is spared shame, and John says this was the *first* of Jesus's signs — the debut. The disciples believed in him. Nobody at the party except the servants ever knew.

A SAMPLE TELLING

The first miracle Jesus ever performed was not a healing. It wasn't casting anything out, or calming any storm. It was saving a party.

There's a wedding in Cana, a small village in Galilee. Weddings there weren't an afternoon — they were days of feasting, the biggest celebration a family would ever host, with the whole town invited and the family's honor on the table alongside the

food. Jesus is there as a guest. His mother's there. His disciples — brand new, barely knowing what they've signed up for — are there too.

And the wine runs out.

To us that's an inconvenience. To them it was a catastrophe. Hospitality was sacred; running dry mid-feast would shame that bridegroom and his family in front of everyone they knew, and the town would still be telling the story at his funeral.

Mary notices before the party does. And she goes to Jesus and says four words: "They have no wine." That's it. She doesn't ask for anything — she just puts the need in front of him, like a woman who has known him for thirty years and knows exactly what she's doing.

Jesus says, "Dear woman, why involve me? My time has not yet come." And Mary — I love this — completely ignores the objection. She turns to the servants and says, "Do whatever he tells you." Which may be the best one-sentence summary of faith in the whole Bible.

Standing nearby are six stone water jars, the kind used for ceremonial washing — religious equipment, twenty or thirty gallons apiece. Jesus tells the servants: fill them with water. To the brim, John says — the servants topped them off. Then: dip some out and take it to the master of ceremonies.

The master of ceremonies tastes it — and it's wine. Not passable wine. He calls the bridegroom over, baffled and delighted: "Everyone serves the best wine first, and brings out the cheap stuff once the guests are past caring. But *you* — you've saved the best for last!"

Do the math on those jars, because John wants you to: somewhere between 120 and 180 gallons. Hundreds of bottles of the best wine of the feast, for a village party that was already days in. It's not a rescue. It's an avalanche of joy.

And notice who knew. Not the master of ceremonies. Not the groom, who got the credit. Only the servants — the lowest people at the party — and the disciples. John says this was the first of his signs, and his disciples believed in him.

This is how the ministry of Jesus opens: quietly, at a table, saving an ordinary family from shame, turning religious washing-water into wedding wine. Joy isn't a side effect of the kingdom. It's the signature. First thing he ever showed anyone.

THE FOUR QUESTIONS, TUNED

01 What stood out to you?

02 What does this show us about Jesus — that *this* is where he chose to begin?

03 Where are you in this story — the family about to run dry, Mary putting a need in front of him, or a servant filling jars without knowing why?

04 So what are we going to do about it?

> **AN ACT**
>
> Make joy for someone this week, extravagantly and anonymously if you can — cover a stranger's meal, celebrate somebody who never gets celebrated, rescue a small occasion from going flat. Best wine, no credit taken. That's the signature.

STORY 22 · THE TABLE

Dinner at Levi's House

Read it first: Mark 2:13–17

THE FIVE CS

CONTEXT

Early in Galilee. Jesus is drawing crowds — and drawing attention from the religious establishment, who are starting to watch his choices.

CHARACTERS

Levi, sitting in his tax booth — a collaborator, taking his neighbors' money for Rome. Jesus. Levi's guest list: *many tax collectors and other disreputable sinners*. And the religious scholars, watching from the edges.

CONFLICT

Jesus doesn't just call Levi — he goes to dinner at his house, with the whole disreputable crowd. In that world, eating with someone was accepting them. The scholars ask the disciples the loaded question: why does he eat with such scum?

CLIMAX

Jesus hears it and answers over the table: healthy people don't need a doctor — sick people do. I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners.

CHANGE

Levi leaves the booth for good and his house becomes the place the wrong crowd met Jesus. The accusation the scholars meant as scandal — *he eats with sinners* — becomes the plainest description of Jesus's whole ministry, and the founding story of every open table since.

A SAMPLE TELLING

Levi had a job that made him rich and hated in the same motion. He sat in a tax booth in Capernaum collecting money from his own neighbors — for Rome. The empire standing on everyone's neck, and Levi was its local cashier, with a markup for himself. Tax collectors weren't just disliked; they were classified with robbers, banned as witnesses in court, treated as traitors to God and country both. Nobody chose Levi. Nobody sat with Levi.

Jesus is walking by the booth. And he stops, looks at this man everyone had written off, and says two words: "Follow me."

And Levi gets up, leaves the booth — the money, the position, the whole rotten, lucrative arrangement — and follows him.

But here's where the story actually gets scandalous. That night there's a dinner at Levi's house, and look at the guest list: Levi's people. *Many tax collectors and other notorious sinners*, Mark says — the whole network of people who, like Levi, weren't welcome anywhere respectable. And Jesus is at the table with all of them, and so are his disciples, eating.

You need to know what a shared table meant in that world: it wasn't just food. To eat with someone was to accept them — publicly, bodily. You were saying *these are my people* with every bite. Which is exactly why the religious scholars, watching from the edges, were appalled. They pull the disciples aside with the question dripping off them: "Why does he eat with such scum?"

Jesus hears it. And he answers across the table, in front of everyone — including the guests who'd just been called scum:

"Healthy people don't need a doctor — sick people do. I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners."

Turn that sentence over. It's got an edge the scholars would have felt: not "the righteous" but those who *think* they are. The dinner guests knew what they were — that's exactly what qualified them for the table. The watchers outside were the ones whose certainty about their own health kept the doctor at arm's length.

And notice what Jesus doesn't do. He doesn't defend the dinner as a strategy — "I'm here to fix them, then I'll leave." He's not holding his nose. He's *eating*. Reclining, at length, at Levi's table, with Levi's friends, in full view of town. His enemies meant "he eats with sinners" as the charge against him. It ended up being the most accurate one-line summary of his ministry anyone ever wrote.

If you've ever wondered whether you'd be welcome at Jesus's table — or whether the person you're thinking of inviting to this one would be — this story already answered it, in Capernaum, at dinner, out loud.

THE FOUR QUESTIONS, TUNED

01 What stood out to you?

02 What does this show us about Jesus — what his table said that his words then underlined?

03 Where are you in this story — in the booth, at the table, or honestly sometimes at the edges with the question?

04 So what are we going to do about it?

> **AN ACT**
>
> Levi's response to being included was to throw a dinner and invite his people. So: who are *your* people who'd never darken a church door? One shared meal this week or next — your table, their comfort zone, no agenda except the eating. That's the whole act. The table does the rest.

STORY 23 · THE TABLE

The Woman with the Perfume

Read it first: Luke 7:36–50

THE FIVE CS

CONTEXT

A Pharisee named Simon invites Jesus to dinner — curious, maybe testing. Dinners like this were semi-public; townspeople could stand at the edges and watch. One of them doesn't stay at the edge.

CHARACTERS

Simon, the respectable host. Jesus, the guest who wasn't given the customary courtesies. And a woman *known in that city as a sinner* — everyone at the table knows exactly what that means — carrying an alabaster jar of expensive perfume.

CONFLICT

She comes to Jesus's feet, weeping, and does something socially unthinkable: wets his feet with her tears, wipes them with her unbound hair, kisses them, anoints them with the perfume. Simon watches and concludes, silently: if this man were a prophet, he'd know what kind of woman is touching him.

CLIMAX

Jesus answers the thought Simon never spoke — with a tiny parable about two canceled debts and one question: *which will love him more*? Then he turns to the woman while talking to Simon: you gave me no water, no kiss, no oil — she hasn't stopped since I arrived. Her many sins have been forgiven — as her great love has shown.

CHANGE

He speaks to her directly — the first person at the dinner to do so: your sins are forgiven; your faith has saved you; go in peace. The respectable table is scandalized twice over. And the story leaves the equation glowing: the ones forgiven much, love much. The ones who love little are telling on what they think they needed.

A SAMPLE TELLING

A Pharisee named Simon invited Jesus to dinner. Give Simon partial credit — most of his colleagues were muttering about Jesus from a distance; Simon at least set him a place. Though notice, as the story does, what he didn't do: no water for Jesus's feet,

no kiss of greeting, no oil for his head — the basic courtesies of that world. Jesus got a seat, but a cold one. Curiosity without honor.

Dinners like that were semi-public — doors open, townspeople free to stand along the walls and listen. Which is how *she* got in.

Luke introduces her the way the whole town would have: a woman known in that city as a sinner. Everyone reclining at that table knew her reputation. She knew they knew. She came anyway, carrying an alabaster jar of expensive perfume, and she came straight to Jesus.

And then she falls apart. She's standing behind him at his feet, weeping — weeping enough that her tears are falling on his feet — and she kneels and does the unthinkable: she lets down her hair. A woman did not unbind her hair in public; it was intimate, shameful, scandalous. She wipes his feet with it. Kisses them, again and again. Breaks open the jar and pours out the perfume.

The room must have been rigid. And Simon, watching, says nothing out loud — but Luke lets us hear his thoughts: *If this man were a prophet, he'd know what kind of woman is touching him.*

Jesus answers the thought. Out loud. "Simon, I have something to say to you."

And he tells him a sixty-second story: a moneylender had two debtors — one owed five hundred pieces of silver, one owed fifty. Neither could pay, so he canceled both debts. Which of them will love him more? Simon answers carefully — "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the larger debt." "Correct," Jesus says.

Then he turns toward the woman — but keeps speaking to Simon, and every line lands twice: "Do you see this woman? I entered your home, and you didn't give me water for my feet — she has washed them with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss of greeting — she hasn't stopped kissing my feet since I came in. You didn't anoint my head with oil — she has anointed my feet with rare perfume."

And then the sentence to carry out of this story: "Her many sins have been forgiven — as her great love has shown. But a person who is forgiven little shows only little love."

Then he speaks to her — and realize, he's the first person at that dinner to address her as a person at all: "Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you. Go in peace."

The table erupts in the safest kind of scandal — *who does he think he is, forgiving sins*? — but the story isn't watching them anymore. It's watching her go, in peace, out the same door she'd had to brave to come in.

One more thing, so we read it right: the perfume didn't purchase the forgiveness. Jesus's little parable puts the order plainly — the debt was canceled first; the love came pouring out *after*, as the evidence. She didn't love her way into grace. She'd met grace, and this is what it turned into. Which leaves Simon's cold hospitality asking its own quiet question: what does love that small say about what he thought he'd been forgiven?

THE FOUR QUESTIONS, TUNED

01 What stood out to you?

02 What does this show us about Jesus — how he receives an offering everyone else found shameful?

03 Where are you in this story — the woman with nothing left to protect, or Simon, correct and cold? What would loving Jesus *extravagantly* even look like for you?

04 So what are we going to do about it?

> **AN ACT**
>
> Extravagance is the act this week — do one thing for God or for a person that's a little too much: too generous, too vulnerable, too openly grateful, past the point of respectable. And if there's a "Simon voice" in your head that narrates other people's worthiness, catch it once this week and answer it with this story.

STORY 24 · THE TABLE

The Feeding of the Five Thousand

Read it first: Mark 6:30–44

THE FIVE CS

CONTEXT

The apostles have just returned from being sent out, exhausted; John the Baptist has just been executed. Jesus takes them by boat to a remote place to rest — and the crowds run around the shoreline and beat them there.

CHARACTERS

Jesus, who sees the crowd and has compassion — *sheep without a shepherd.* The tired disciples, who see a logistics problem. A crowd of five thousand men, plus women and children. And somewhere in it, a lunch: five loaves, two fish.

CONFLICT

Evening comes in the middle of nowhere. The disciples' plan: send them away to buy food. Jesus's answer, impossible on its face: *you* give them something to eat.

CLIMAX

He takes the five loaves and two fish, looks up to heaven, gives thanks, breaks the bread — and keeps handing it to the disciples, who keep handing it out, and it doesn't stop.

CHANGE

Everyone eats until they're full — the word means satisfied, stuffed — and twelve baskets of leftovers come back, one for each disciple who'd said it couldn't be done. The biggest table in history, seated on green grass, catered by one lunch that got given away.

A SAMPLE TELLING

The disciples were running on empty. Jesus had sent them out two by two, and they'd come back full of stories and completely spent. And the news had just come in that John the Baptist — Jesus's cousin, the forerunner — had been executed. It was a heavy, exhausted moment, and Jesus said: come away with me, just us, somewhere quiet, and rest.

So they got in a boat for a remote spot across the water. And the crowds saw where they were headed, and ran — on foot, around the shoreline, from all the towns — and were standing on the beach *waiting* when the boat landed. So much for quiet.

Here's the hinge of the whole story, and it's not the miracle: Jesus stepped off the boat, saw that enormous, needy, rest-canceling crowd — and *had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.* Where the tired disciples saw a problem, he saw the lostness. And he began to teach them, for hours.

By late afternoon the disciples have had enough, and their suggestion is perfectly sensible: "This is a remote place and it's getting late. Send the people away so they can go buy themselves something to eat."

And Jesus says the sentence this story exists for: "*You* feed them."

You can hear the sputtering. "That would take a small fortune! Are we supposed to go buy bread for this whole crowd?" Jesus just asks: "How much bread do you have? Go and find out." They come back with the inventory: five loaves and two fish. One person's lunch, in front of five thousand men — plus women and children, so likely well over ten thousand people.

And Jesus works with it. He has everyone sit down in groups on the green grass — Mark remembers the grass was green; eyewitness details stick like that. Then he takes the five loaves and the two fish, looks up to heaven, gives thanks, and breaks the bread — and starts handing it to the disciples to distribute.

And it doesn't run out. That's how Mark tells it — no lightning, no announcement. Bread keeps leaving Jesus's hands into the disciples' hands into the crowd's hands, and it. doesn't. stop. Everyone ate — and the word Mark uses means *satisfied.* Full. Ten thousand strangers on a hillside, fed to fullness off one surrendered lunch.

Then Jesus has them collect the leftovers — nothing wasted — and they gather twelve baskets. Count the disciples. Twelve. Every man who'd said "impossible" walked home carrying a basket of the surplus.

Notice the shape of the miracle, because it's the shape of everything this table does. Jesus didn't rain bread from the sky over the disciples' heads. He took what was actually there, blessed it, broke it — and put it in *their* hands to give away. The multiplication happened in the distributing. "You feed them" wasn't a setup for the punchline. It was the assignment, and it still is.

THE FOUR QUESTIONS, TUNED

01 What stood out to you?

02 What does this show us about Jesus — his compassion, and his insistence on using what's in our hands?

03 Where are you in this story — the exhausted disciple saying "send them away," the kid handing over lunch, or someone holding a basket of leftovers you didn't expect?

04 So what are we going to do about it?

> **AN ACT**
>
> Inventory night: as a table, answer Jesus's actual question — *how much bread do you have*? List what's actually in this group's hands: skills, hours, tools, rooms, money, connections. Small is fine; small is the story. Then pick one need nearby and put one loaf into circulation this week. The multiplication happens in the distributing.

STORY 25 · THE TABLE

Take the Low Seat

Read it first: Luke 14:1, 7–14

THE FIVE CS

CONTEXT

A Sabbath dinner at the home of a leading Pharisee, where Jesus is being *carefully watched*. He's watching back — Luke says he noticed how the guests were all jockeying for the seats of honor.

CHARACTERS

Status-conscious dinner guests maneuvering for position near the host. The host himself, with his carefully curated guest list. Jesus, the guest who critiques the seating chart and then the invitations.

CONFLICT

Two polite corruptions of the table, exposed in one evening: guests using it to climb (grab the high seat), and hosts using it to trade (invite those who can repay).

CLIMAX

Two teachings, back to back. To the guests: take the lowest place, and let honor be given, never grabbed — for the proud will be humbled, and the humble honored. To the host: next time, don't invite your friends, family, and rich neighbors, who'll return the favor — invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, who *can't* repay you.

CHANGE

God will repay you at the resurrection of the righteous, Jesus says — the only reward system at the table that isn't a trade. The whole economy of honor and reciprocity is quietly dismantled between courses.

A SAMPLE TELLING

Jesus got invited to a Sabbath dinner at the home of a prominent Pharisee, and Luke tells us the mood in one phrase: *they were watching him closely*. It was a dinner and a stakeout.

But Jesus was watching too. And what he noticed was the little dance everyone did coming in — guests eyeing the seating, angling for the places of honor nearest the host. In that world, where you sat *was* who you were; the table was a public scoreboard, and everyone was quietly playing.

So Jesus, a guest, offers the room some advice — and it starts out sounding like simple dinner-party wisdom: "When you're invited to a wedding feast, don't take the seat of honor. Because what if someone more distinguished than you was invited? Then the host has to come over and say, in front of everyone, 'Give this man your seat' — and you'll have to slink down to the last place, red-faced, with the whole room watching. Instead, take the lowest place. Then when the host comes, he'll say, 'Friend — come up higher!' and you'll be honored in front of everybody."

Practical enough. But then he lands the real point, and it's much bigger than seating: "For the proud will be humbled, and the humble will be honored." That's not etiquette. That's how the kingdom works, announced at a dinner party: honor is real, but it can only be *given*. The moment you grab it, it turns to embarrassment in your hand.

Then — and you have to love the nerve of this — Jesus turns to the man who invited him and critiques the guest list. "When you put on a luncheon or a banquet," he says, "don't invite your friends, your brothers, your relatives, and your rich neighbors. For they will invite you back, and that will be your only reward."

Feel what he just named. The whole respectable social world ran on that loop — I host you, you host me, hospitality as an exchange of equal favors between equals. It looks generous. It's actually a trade, and everyone's books balance.

"Instead," Jesus says, "invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Then at the resurrection of the righteous, God will reward you for inviting those who could not repay you."

Those who could not repay you. That's the whole teaching in five words. Jesus is telling this host — and every host since — that a table reaches its full sanctity exactly at the point where the math breaks: when the guest can bring nothing, return nothing, add nothing to your standing. That's the seat where God starts keeping the books instead.

One dinner, two corrections: don't use the table to climb, and don't use it to trade. Which leaves only the thing a table was for — and every table that ever asks "who should we invite?" already has the answer written down.

THE FOUR QUESTIONS, TUNED

01 What stood out to you?

02 What does this show us about how God's economy of honor works — given, never grabbed; spent on those who can't repay?

03 Where are you in this story — honestly, where does the seat-scoreboard still run in your life, and whose invitations do you trade?

04 So what are we going to do about it?

> **AN ACT**
>
> Audit one invitation this week. Look at who your table — dinner table, friend group, this gathering — naturally includes, and extend one invitation that breaks the repayment loop: someone who can't advance you, host you back, or improve the room's standing. Low seat optional but recommended.

STORY 26 · THE TABLE

The Great Banquet

Read it first: Luke 14:15–24

THE FIVE CS

CONTEXT

The very same dinner as the low-seat teaching. A guest, moved by all this table-talk, offers a pious toast: *what a blessing it will be to eat at the banquet in the Kingdom of God!* Jesus answers the toast with a story that turns it back on the room.

CHARACTERS

A man giving a great feast. The invited guests — the respectable, already-notified A-list. A servant carrying the "it's ready" summons. And then: the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and finally strangers from the country roads.

CONFLICT

When the feast is ready, the invited all send excuses — a field to inspect, oxen to try out, a new wife. Reasonable-sounding, every one. And every one a way of saying: something matters more to me than your table.

CLIMAX

The host's anger — and what it produces: not a canceled feast but a widened one. *Go quickly into the streets and alleys — bring the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind.* Done, and still room. *Then go out to the country roads, and urge anyone you find to come, so that the house will be full.*

CHANGE

The house will be full — that's non-negotiable; the only variable is who says yes. The A-list excused itself out of the party. Jesus ends on the hard word to the room he's sitting in: none of those first invited will taste the banquet. The seats didn't go empty. They went to the streets.

A SAMPLE TELLING

This happens at the same dinner where Jesus had just told the host to start inviting people who couldn't repay him. And one of the guests — maybe trying to lift the suddenly awkward mood — raises the pious toast: "What a blessing it will be to eat a meal in the Kingdom of God!"

Everyone could agree with that. It's the kind of thing you say when you assume you'll be there.

Jesus answers the toast with a story.

A man prepared a great feast and sent out many invitations. Understand how invitations worked then: you were invited well in advance and you accepted — and then, on the day, when everything was ready, a servant came around to say *come, it's time*. Everyone in this story had already said yes.

The feast is ready. The servant goes out with the summons. And the excuses start.

"I've just bought a field, and I must go inspect it." Who buys a field without looking at it first? "I've just bought five pairs of oxen, and I have to try them out." Same problem — that's like skipping a wedding to test-drive a car you already purchased. "I just got married, so I can't come." At least that one's warm-blooded, but notice he doesn't even ask to bring her.

Hear what the excuses have in common: none of them are emergencies. Nobody's house is on fire. It's property, work, and family — good things, real things — quietly promoted to the spot above the feast. Every excuse is polite. And every excuse means the same thing: *something matters more to me than your table*.

The servant reports back, and the host is angry — and watch what his anger does. It doesn't cancel the feast. It *widens the doors*. "Go quickly into the streets and alleys of the town," he says, "and invite the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame." The exact list from Jesus's advice to his host an hour earlier — the people who can't repay. The servant does it, and comes back: "It's done — and there's still room."

Still room. Two of the best words in the story.

So the host pushes further out: "Go out into the country lanes and behind the hedges — and *urge* anyone you find to come, so that my house will be full." Past the town now, out to the strangers, the drifters, the people who'd never imagine the invitation could mean them — and the instruction isn't just to inform them. It's to urge them, because people like that assume there's been a mistake.

And the host's one fixed decision, the thing that was never negotiable: *the house will be full*. The banquet was always happening. The seats were always getting filled. The

only question the invited ever controlled was whether they'd be in them — and Jesus ends the story looking at the room he's eating in: "None of those I first invited will get even the smallest taste of my banquet."

The guest's toast assumed the banquet was safely his. The story hands the toast back with a question inside it: the feast is ready and the invitation is out — what's your field?

THE FOUR QUESTIONS, TUNED

01 What stood out to you?

02 What does this show us about God — a host whose answer to rejection is wider doors and a fuller house?

03 Where are you in this story — holding a polite excuse, or out past the hedges assuming the invitation can't mean you? Name your field.

04 So what are we going to do about it?

> **AN ACT**
>
> Be the servant this week: one *urging* invitation — to this table, to a meal, to belonging — aimed past the usual streets, at someone who'd assume there's been a mistake. And privately, name the excuse you've been sending God, and skip it once this week to show up instead.

STORY 27 · THE TABLE

The Towel

Read it first: John 13:1–17

THE FIVE CS

CONTEXT

The night before the crucifixion, at the last supper. John frames it with everything Jesus knows: that his hour has come, that the Father has given all things into his hands, that he came from God and is going to God. *Knowing all that* — he picks up a towel.

CHARACTERS

Jesus. Twelve pairs of dirty feet — including Judas's; John pointedly notes the betrayal is already in motion. Peter, who cannot bear what's happening.

CONFLICT

Footwashing was the lowest job in the house — reserved for the lowest servant, never for a peer, unthinkable for a master. Nobody at that supper had done it, because doing it would have settled who ranked last. Jesus gets up mid-meal and does it.

CLIMAX

Peter refuses — *you will never wash my feet!* — and Jesus answers: unless I wash you, you have no part with me. Peter, all in as always: then not just my feet — hands and head too!

CHANGE

Jesus puts his robe back on, returns to the table, and asks: do you understand what I've done? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you're right. So if I have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other's. I have given you an example. Leadership is defined once, permanently, with a towel — and the definition includes the feet of the one who's about to betray him.

A SAMPLE TELLING

It's the night before Jesus dies, and he knows it. John says so, three ways in one sentence: Jesus knew his hour had come, knew the Father had given everything into his hands, knew he had come from God and was returning to God. Total clarity about who he was and what he held.

So — and John means the "so" — he got up from supper, took off his robe, wrapped a towel around his waist, and poured water into a basin.

You have to know what that meant. Roads were dust and worse; feet arrived at dinner filthy; and washing them was the job of the lowest servant in the house — so low that Jewish servants were often exempted from it. Among equals, nobody washed anybody's feet, because kneeling down there answered the question everyone in that room had been arguing about for years: *who's the greatest*? — by declaring yourself the least. Thirteen men had walked into that room past the water jar. Twelve of them had pretended not to see it.

The thirteenth was God in the flesh, and he knelt down and started washing.

Around the circle he goes — and John has already told us Judas is at that table with the betrayal live in his heart. Jesus knows. He washes those feet too. Don't rush past that: the towel touched the feet that were about to walk out and sell him.

Then he gets to Peter, and Peter can't take it. "Lord — *you* are going to wash *my* feet?" And then flat refusal: "You will never wash my feet. Not ever." Peter would rather serve than be served; there's a pride that hides inside humility, and Peter's got it. But Jesus is gentle and immovable: "Unless I wash you, you won't belong to me." And Peter, who only has one speed, swings all the way over: "Then wash my hands and my head too!"

When he's finished, Jesus puts his robe back on, returns to his place, and asks the question this whole scene was building to: "Do you understand what I have done for you?"

"You call me Teacher and Lord — and you're right, because that's what I am. And since I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other's feet. I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you." And then: "Now that you know these things — God will bless you for *doing* them."

There it is: the only time Jesus ever says "I have given you an example," and the example is a towel. Not a strategy, not a stage, not a title. The greatest person in the room is the one on the floor, and greatness in his family will forever be measured in the direction of down. Every kind of leadership this table will ever need — hosting,

guiding, parenting, sending — got defined that night, permanently, in a basin of dirty water. And the definition came with no exemptions: it included the feet of the friend who was already gone in his heart.

THE FOUR QUESTIONS, TUNED

01 What stood out to you?

02 What does this show us about Jesus — what he did with total power, on his worst night?

03 Where are you in this story — pretending not to see the water jar, refusing like Peter, or holding a towel? Whose feet are hardest for you to imagine washing?

04 So what are we going to do about it?

> **AN ACT**
>
> Find the low job near you this week and do it — the task in your house, workplace, or church that's beneath your position, the one everyone walks past. Do it without announcing it. Advanced version: do it for someone who's wronged you. That's the Judas clause, and it's in the example.

STORY 28 · THE TABLE

The Last Supper

Read it first: Luke 22:14–20

THE FIVE CS

CONTEXT

Passover — the meal Israel had eaten for over a thousand years, remembering the night God freed them from Egypt: the lamb, the bread of haste, the story retold by every generation as its own. Jesus has *eagerly desired* to eat this one with his friends before he suffers, and he knows it's the last.

CHARACTERS

Jesus and the apostles around a table — his people, one of whom will betray him, one deny him, all of whom will scatter by morning. He knows all of it, and hosts them anyway.

CONFLICT

The oldest meal in Israel's memory is about to be given a new center — and the ones receiving it don't understand yet. Death is hours away, and Jesus spends the evening not being consoled but *giving*.

CLIMAX

He takes bread, gives thanks, breaks it, and hands it to them: *this is my body, given for you — do this in remembrance of me*. Then the cup after supper: *this cup is the new covenant in my blood, poured out for you*.

CHANGE

The apostles leave that room carrying a meal instead of a monument. No shrine, no book, no institution — a table practice, portable to anywhere two or three gather, in remembrance of him. Twenty centuries later it's still the most-repeated meal on earth, and it was handed to ordinary people at supper, the night everything fell apart.

A SAMPLE TELLING

It was Passover — and you need to feel the weight of that word to feel this night. For over a thousand years, Israel had eaten this exact meal on this exact night: the lamb, the unleavened bread, the cups of wine, the youngest child asking *why is this night different*? — and the whole story of the exodus told again, every year, in every generation, as if it happened to *you*. Passover was memory you could taste. A story kept alive by a meal.

Jesus gathers his apostles in a borrowed upstairs room for it, and he opens with a sentence that should stop us: "I have *earnestly desired* to eat this Passover with you before I suffer." He knows exactly what's coming — the betrayal already purchased, the arrest hours away, the cross tomorrow. And what he wants, more than anything, on his last free evening on earth, is supper with his friends.

Look around that table the way he did. Judas is there — Jesus knows. Peter is there, hours from swearing he never knew him — Jesus knows that too, and says so at this very meal. Every man at that table will run before sunrise. He hosts them all anyway. The last supper was not a table of the worthy. It never has been.

Then, partway through the ancient meal, Jesus does something no one had ever done in a thousand years of Passovers: he steps into the middle of the story and gives it a new center.

He takes bread — the bread of the exodus, the bread of haste — gives thanks, breaks it, and hands it around: "This is my body, given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

And after supper, the cup: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you."

Feel what the apostles must have felt, even without understanding: the oldest words in their world, rewritten in front of them. For a thousand years the meal had meant *remember what God did — the lamb, the blood, the freedom*. Now: remember *me*. My body. My blood. A new covenant — the thing the prophets had promised, sealed not in stone this time but poured out at a supper table.

And notice the shape of what he left behind, because it tells you everything about him. On his last night, Jesus did not commission a monument, dictate a book, found an institution, or appoint a successor. He gave his friends *a meal* — the most repeatable, portable, democratic thing there is. Bread and a cup exist everywhere. A table can happen anywhere. "Do this" is an instruction any two or three gathered people on earth can obey, in a cathedral or a kitchen, and for twenty centuries they have — an unbroken chain of tables running from that upstairs room to this one.

He was hours from being taken, and he spent the evening giving. He knew everyone at the table would fail him by morning, and he fed them all. That's the night it comes from. That's what's being remembered, every single time.

THE FOUR QUESTIONS, TUNED

01 What stood out to you?

02 What does this show us about Jesus — what he chose to do, and to leave behind, on his last night?

03 Where are you in this story — and what does it mean to you that everyone at that first table was hours from failing him, and he fed them anyway?

04 So what are we going to do about it?

> **AN ACT**
>
> Remembrance is the act — his chosen kind. Once this week, at an ordinary meal, stop before you eat and remember him — out loud with your family or silently alone. And ask your pastor the communion question this story raised, whatever it was; the asking is part of belonging to your church.

STORY 29 · THE TABLE

The Road to Emmaus

Read it first: Luke 24:13–35

THE FIVE CS

CONTEXT

Resurrection Sunday — but nobody on this road believes that yet. Two of Jesus's followers are walking the seven miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus, leaving the wreckage behind: the crucifixion three days past, and strange, unconfirmed reports from the women about an empty tomb this very morning.

CHARACTERS

Cleopas and an unnamed companion, walking and grieving. And a stranger who falls in step with them — Jesus himself, though *they were kept from recognizing him*.

CONFLICT

The stranger asks what they're discussing, and their grief spills out: we had hoped he was the Messiah who would rescue Israel. *We had hoped* — past tense. Hope with a headstone.

CLIMAX

Two revelations in sequence. On the road: the stranger opens the Scriptures — Moses, the prophets, all of it — showing the Messiah *had* to suffer before entering his glory, and their hearts burn without their knowing why. At the table: he takes bread, blesses it, breaks it, gives it — and their eyes are opened. It's him. And he vanishes.

CHANGE

They get up *that very hour* and walk the seven miles back to Jerusalem in the dark — the road of despair walked in reverse, at speed — to tell the others. And Luke keeps their exact phrase: he was made known to them *in the breaking of the bread*.

A SAMPLE TELLING

It's Sunday — the third day — but the two people in this story don't know what that means yet. They're walking away from Jerusalem, seven miles to a village called Emmaus, and they are walking away from the wreckage of everything they'd believed. Friday, they watched their teacher die. And this very morning came bizarre reports — women from their own group claiming the tomb was empty, talking about angels — which somehow made it worse. Grief plus confusion is heavier than grief.

A stranger catches up and falls in step. Luke tells us the secret straight away: it's Jesus — *but they were kept from recognizing him*. Hold that. The risen Lord chooses to walk seven miles incognito beside two heartbroken people.

"What are you discussing so intently?" he asks. They stop, and Luke says their faces were downcast. Cleopas almost laughs at him: "You must be the only person in Jerusalem who doesn't know what's happened these last few days." "What things?" says the one it all happened to.

And it pours out of them — the story as grief tells it: Jesus of Nazareth, a mighty prophet, handed over by our leaders, crucified. And then the sentence that carries the whole ache: "*We had hoped* he was the Messiah who had come to rescue Israel."

We had hoped. Past tense. Say it slowly, because everyone at your table has a sentence that starts that way.

Now watch what the stranger does — and what he doesn't. He doesn't reveal himself. No shortcut, no "look, it's me, cheer up." Instead: "Wasn't it clearly predicted that the Messiah would have to suffer all these things before entering his glory?" And starting with Moses and all the prophets, he walks them through the Scriptures — the whole story they thought they knew — showing them that the cross wasn't the failure of God's plan. It was the plan. Their hope hadn't died on Friday. Their *version* of it had.

They reach Emmaus, and the stranger acts as if he's going farther — he won't invite himself. So *they* urge him: stay with us, it's nearly evening. And he does.

Then, at the table, the guest quietly becomes the host: he takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it, and hands it to them —

— and their eyes are opened. It's *him*. And in the same instant, he's gone.

They sit there staring at broken bread, and say the line every burning-hearted person since has recognized: "Didn't our hearts burn within us as he talked with us on the road?" He'd been there the whole time. In the grief. In the questions. In the walking away, even. Known, at last, in the breaking of the bread.

And then — this is the resurrection doing what it does — they get up *that very hour*, in the dark, and walk the seven miles *back*. The road they'd trudged in despair, they run in reverse. Because news like that doesn't keep till morning.

THE FOUR QUESTIONS, TUNED

01 What stood out to you?

02 What does this show us about Jesus — how he comes alongside grief, and where he lets himself be recognized?

03 Where are you in this story — what's your "we had hoped"? And has anything ever made your heart burn before you understood why?

04 So what are we going to do about it?

> **AN ACT**
>
> Walk somebody's Emmaus road this week: someone in grief or disappointment gets your unhurried company — walking, listening, asking what happened — with no agenda to fix or reveal anything. Stay for the meal if you can. Recognition is God's part; the walking beside is yours.

STORY 30 · THE TABLE

Breakfast on the Beach

Read it first: John 21:1–19

THE FIVE CS

CONTEXT

After the resurrection. The disciples have seen the risen Jesus, but nobody knows what happens now — and Peter, still carrying the night he denied Jesus three times by a charcoal fire, announces: *I'm going fishing*. Back to the boats. Six others go with him.

CHARACTERS

Peter and six disciples, fishing all night, catching nothing — again. A figure on the beach at dawn. A charcoal fire, already burning, with fish and bread on it.

CONFLICT

The failed night echoes the very first call (story 1): empty nets till a voice from shore says try the right side. The nets fill — 153 fish — and John says it first: *it's the Lord!* And Peter, who once told Jesus to leave because he was too sinful, now throws himself into the sea to get to him faster.

CLIMAX

They land to find breakfast already cooking — the risen Lord of the universe has made his failures a meal. *Come and have breakfast*. Nobody dares ask who he is. They know.

CHANGE

After breakfast, by that charcoal fire — the same kind of fire Peter denied him beside — three questions for three denials: *do you love me*? Three yeses, the third one hurting. And restoration, complete. The story that began with Peter in the fish saying "go away from me" ends with Peter dripping wet at a fire, fed and forgiven by the friend he failed. Failure was never the end. It was where breakfast happened.

A SAMPLE TELLING

Jesus had risen — Peter had seen him, twice. And still, one evening on the shore of Galilee, Peter said to the others: "I'm going fishing."

You can read that line a lot of ways, and maybe all of them are true. Fishing was what he knew. His hands needed something to do. And underneath it, unspoken: the last defining thing Peter had done was stand by a charcoal fire in a courtyard and swear, three times, with curses, that he didn't know Jesus. Whatever came next for the

others — maybe a man like that just goes back to the boats. Six of the others went with him.

They fished all night and caught nothing. If that sounds familiar, it should — it's exactly how Peter's story with Jesus *began*, years before: an empty night, a stranger's instruction, and nets that wouldn't hold. The whole scene is about to rhyme on purpose.

Dawn comes, and there's a figure on the beach, maybe a hundred yards off. He calls out: "Friends, have you caught anything?" "No." "Throw your net on the right side of the boat, and you'll get some!"

Humor him. They throw it — and the net loads up so heavy with fish they can't haul it in. And John, the quickest heart in the boat, says it: "It's the Lord!"

Now watch Peter. The first time this miracle happened, years ago, Peter fell down in the fish and said, *get away from me — I'm too much of a sinner to be near you*. This time — carrying a far worse failure than he'd ever imagined back then — Peter grabs his coat, throws himself into the sea, and swims. He cannot get to Jesus fast enough. Somewhere between those two catches, Peter learned the thing this whole canon keeps saying: your failure is a reason to run t*oward* him.

The boat drags the net in — 153 large fish; John counted, the way you count a morning you'll retell forever — and when they stumble ashore they find something that undoes me every time I read it: a charcoal fire, already burning. Fish already cooking on it. Bread. The risen Lord, death defeated, glory available — and he got up early and made his friends breakfast.

"Come and have breakfast," Jesus says. And John adds this: none of them dared ask "who are you?" — they knew. There's a kind of knowing too deep for the question. So they eat, the eight of them, around a fire on a beach, and heaven's first recorded act after the resurrection appearances settle in is c*ooking*.

Then, when they'd finished — quietly, by that fire — Jesus turns to Peter. And you should know the detail John plants: it's a *charcoal* fire. The word appears exactly twice in his gospel — the fire Peter denied him beside, and this one. Jesus rebuilt the scene of Peter's worst night, and then filled it with breakfast.

"Simon, do you love me?" — "Yes, Lord, you know I love you." A second time: "Do you love me?" — "Yes, Lord." And a third — and the third one hurt, Peter felt exactly what was being counted — "Do you love me?" "Lord, you know everything. You know I love you."

Three denials. Three questions. Three yeses. The wound unmade at the same kind of fire it was made beside — not by pretending Friday night never happened, but by walking back through it, together, with food.

What Jesus does with all that restored love — the sending — is its own story, and this table will get to it. Tonight, just sit with where the failure ended up: not in exile. At breakfast.

THE FOUR QUESTIONS, TUNED

01 What stood out to you?

02 What does this show us about Jesus — what the risen Lord does first for the friend who failed him worst?

03 Where are you in this story — back at the boats, swimming toward the shore, or still standing at the old charcoal fire? What would it take to believe breakfast is waiting there instead?

04 So what are we going to do about it?

> **AN ACT**
>
> Make breakfast for a restoration this week — literally if you can. Share a meal with someone where there's a strain, a distance, or an old failure (yours or theirs), and let the food do what confrontation can't. If the person you most need this meal with is yourself: eat it slowly, and take the three questions as addressed to you.

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