

A Tale of Two Portals: The Table and the Cross

Based on Luke 23:33-46, Acts 1:6-14, & John 20:19-23

A Message Offered by Toby Jones to the People of ChxUCC on Feb 1, 2026

Back in early September, when I was in Belfast, Ireland for a Peace-making retreat, one of our speakers said something that has stuck with me ever since. It was American theologian Diana Butler Bass, and she said, “Isn’t it interesting that while the last place the disciples saw Jesus alive was on the cross at Golgotha, the place they gathered after he was gone to remember him was the table in the upper room?”

Have you ever thought about that? What does it say about Jesus and his followers that the table – not the cross – is the place to gather and remember Jesus? Let’s dive into these two images or symbols for a few minutes. We’ll begin with the cross.

The cross is the ultimate symbol of human power, dominance, and hierarchy. That’s why the Romans used it as their primary tool of oppression. In the hands of the Romans, the cross said, “Don’t mess with us! We have power; you don’t. If you challenge us and our authority, we will nail you to this, so that you – and everyone else – will know who truly has the power around here.

The cross reflects the way empires use violence, bloodshed, and terror to keep people beneath them, to trap citizens in fear and to show who is boss. Let’s remember that Jesus was tortured and killed on the cross NOT for being a religious leader but for being a political revolutionary. The following he had developed in three short years threatened the Romans and their well-established hierarchy and authority. That’s why the Romans hung a sign above Jesus’s head that said, “The King of the Jews.” Jesus’s ministry had upset the apple cart of the unquestioned power and authority the Romans had established in Israel. Luke’s account of the crucifixion shows us exactly how the Romans used the cross to belittle, terrify, persecute, and control the people, because it wasn’t just the Romans who mocked Jesus during the crucifixion; it was the people as well. They joined the Romans in hurling insults at Jesus: “He saved others; let him save himself if he is God’s Messiah

and Chosen One...Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" they cried. In essence, these fellow Roman subjects and countrymen of Jesus were saying, 'Don't mess with the cross. The cross is true power and will get you every time, no matter who you are!' It was, undoubtedly, this same fear and cross-induced terror that led Peter to deny even knowing Jesus those three times on the night of Jesus's arrest.

So, no...as the disciples waited in confusion, sadness, and disbelief after the crucifixion of their rabbi and messiah, they didn't wait at the foot of cross. They didn't wait and wonder and pray in that place of the skull – Golgotha -as the Romans called it. Instead, they returned to the table. They chose to wait at the table in the upper room, the very table where they had recently celebrated and shared the Passover meal with Jesus.

Let's spend a few moments reflecting on the table as a symbol. While the cross is vertical – with a top and a bottom – the table is flat. While the cross is a symbol of human power, authority, and violence, the table is a symbol of mutuality, respect, collaboration. While the cross puts some at the top in power and others at the bottom in subservience, the table puts all people at the same level, looking at one another eye to eye, and sharing the fruits of the harvest together.

The table – and not just the table in the upper room in Jerusalem - but ALL the tables the disciples had shared with Jesus over the years - was the place where they talked, asked questions, listened to stories, made plans, and prayed. The table was where the 12 felt closest to their rabbi and teacher, so, of course, they would convene at the table in their attempt to make sense of the unspeakable tragedy of Jesus's crucifixion.

In one sense, I suppose we could say that the disciples' post-crucifixion gathering at that upper room table was a continuation of Jesus's revolution. To not gather at the foot of the cross or at Golgotha was a way of saying, "We reject Rome's understanding of power and authority. We reject your human hierarchies and the violence you rely on to keep them in place." By gathering as equals at the communion table, the disciples declared, "*Thy* kingdom come, *thy* will be done on earth..."

You see, friends, in a world that worships violence, human hierarchies, and the oppression of others by force, gathering at a table like this one is a revolutionary act. It is a rejection of violence and the taking of others' lives. The table is a rejection of the kind of power that says some don't belong or aren't welcome here. Remember those occasions when Jesus sat down at a table filled with prostitutes, tax collectors, and other notorious outsiders and was criticized for doing so? "Such sinners don't belong at a table with a rabbi," some scoffed. But even then, the table was a revolutionary act. The table was a resounding "NO!" to traditional and even religious understandings of who was in and who was out.

You see, the table is flat; the table is non-hierarchical; and here, in the United Church of Christ, the table is open to everyone. It's not my table. It's not yours. It's not the church's table. It's not a table where we get to say who is welcome and who isn't. It's the very same table those terrified and devastated disciples ran to when they didn't where else to go. It's the same table where those disciples sat at and wept for their crucified Lord, wondering what in the world they were supposed to do next.

There was no use hanging around the cross. That was Rome's thing – their power trip. Jesus didn't belong on a cross; he belonged at a table, which is probably why, when he rose from the dead, the very first place he appeared to his disciples was...you guessed it...at the table in that upper room, where they had celebrated the Passover together just a few days earlier. And do you remember the next place he appeared to them? It was up in Galilee, where they were fishing. Jesus had made a fire on the beach and set up a make-shift table for them to eat some of the fish they had caught. That was where Peter – so filled with shame and regret – sat across from Jesus and where Jesus restored him to discipleship, saying, "Simon, son of John, do you love me...? Then take care of my sheep."

The table is a place of mutuality, a place of shared power, and restoration. The cross, on the other hand, is a place of violence, oppression, and domination. And that brings us to what in the heck the table and cross have to do with our sermon series – Jumping into the story of Jesus. Well,

looking at the stories of the bible as portals or entryways for us, I've come to realize that, as individuals and even as a nation, we have two very distinct portals that we can jump into. Do we prefer the way of violence and bloodshed, as embodied in the Roman cross. Is that the the sort of story we want to jump into? Or do we prefer the way of the table? Is the table our desired portal?

As I look around the world – and especially America today – I see a lot of people opting for the violence and oppressive capabilities of the cross. Witness our culture's obsession with guns and our refusal to take any meaningful steps toward curbing gun violence. Think about our current president's desire to attack other countries or take them over as our own. Or witness our leader's decision to pull out of the United Nations, an organization founded on the principles of international peace and based on – you guessed it – the table – the negotiating table. And, then, of course, there are the current and well-documented tactics of ICE – mask-wearing aggressors, barging into homes without warrants, using violence even when it isn't required against unarmed civilians. This is the story of the cross, a commitment to the notion that superior firepower and aggressive behavior is the best way for us to achieve our goals. The story of the Roman cross is, most certainly, a story you can jump into, and hundreds of millions of our fellow citizens seem to have chosen it. That is the story they're jumping into.

But there, beneath the cross, sitting silently, is the table. And the table is a portal as well. The table invites us into a story where we sit down together, break bread together, reason together, problem-solve peacefully together. The table is a place without rank or hierarchy, without weapons or violence, a place where, as Jesus showed us, everybody has a voice and belongs.

Now, we all know that tables aren't always easy places to be. They don't always lead to wonderful resolutions. But in the way and spirit of Jesus, he'll choose a peaceful table over a violent cross any day of the week, and therefore, so should we...So should we. So which story are you jumping into – the story of the Roman cross...or the story of the table...? Amen.