

I promised y'all a story last week, so a story you're gonna get. Years ago, my mom had one item on her birthday wishlist: The Joy of Cooking Cookbook. So, when mom's birthday rolled around, beside the traditional ice cream cake, a large book-shaped present stood proud. When mom tore open the wrapping, she squealed in delight. Towering above empty plates and a pile of tiny candles, the monolith stood. She was so excited, she started flipping through the pages at random. Whatever she landed on, she'd read the recipe outloud to us, her captive audience. It's not that we wanted to listen to her read recipes. As opening lines go, "set the oven to 350" is no "it was the best of times, it was the worst of times." But, it was her birthday, so we stayed put. At first, the recipes just sounded kinda yummy, and we all dreamed of standing rib roast and strawberry cake gracing our humble kitchen table. But then mom found the wild game section. She was fascinated by the descriptions of how to clean a wild critter. For her, it was a mixture of old memories, the quaint idea of wild game in our suburban home, and a curiosity strong enough to skin a skunk. Once mom got to the bit about the careful removal of glands, my stepdad tapped out. He left to do the dishes while the rest of us were stuck, birthday-obligated to humor her.

I should mention that mom loved every second spent in those pages, especially when she got to read 'em to us, which became a somewhat regular source of dinnertime entertainment. Maybe she knew reading the recipes would get my stepdad doing the dishes, but she really seemed to enjoy it. I'm talking tears-streaming-down-her-face laughter so strong she could barely giggle out the ingredients. Something about all this just tickled her. So, when she finally found the holy grail of culinary experimentation, it took a solid two minutes before she gathered herself enough to let the rest of us in on the joke. In those hallowed pages, mom found a recipe for cooking possum. I'll spare you the details, but if you're ever curious what it takes, find you a copy of the Joy of Cooking and make good use of that index. What you do from there's your business. For mom, it was the source of lots of laughter, and her delight was infectious. Thing is, for years after that fateful birthday, it became a regular dinnertime activity to listen to her read recipes, and inevitably, by request, providence, or long term wear, inevitably we'd end up back where a recitation of possum preparation signaled the end of things, a bookend to a lovely dinner and a family sat 'round a table. This has gone on for years. I mean, y'all, years. We've got one of those great big family Bibles, but I've heard the possum recipe read outloud more than any passage from that holy doorstep. It occupies a distinctly proud position in family lore.

It's Easter, by the way. Happy Easter! This season goes on for a solid 50 days, but Easter Sunday gets the most attention. It's the big day, the celebration explosion. There should be so many eggs that you forget where you hid 'em all. There should be pastels, Mary Janes, and grass stains. In other words, there should be something special for Easter. So, this year, to celebrate Easter Sunday as God intended, mom caught her a possum. She was so excited. She'd been, we'd all been preparing for this moment ever since that Joy of Cooking entered our lives. Now, admittedly, this is not a story about animal rights; you'll have to excuse mom's methods. She caught the critter in one of those have-a-heart traps a few days before Christ came back and kept the trap in the garage. She may've planned on eating the thing, but she wasn't cruel, so she fed it a few times a day, which it eagerly devoured. This was no free-range possum.

As many of you may know, it's real hard to feed and clean up after a critter and not grow some kind of attachment, and if you've ever had to kill to eat, you know you never name your food. Well, Mom did. She named it Polly, Polly the Possum. Between all that food and the itty bitty living space, Polly fattened up like Hansel and Gretel. Holy Saturday arrived, the day of Polly's pending execution. Here's where it gets complicated. Mom has a .22 rifle, but you're not allowed to fire a rifle in town. If she was gonna do this at

home, she'd have to revert to something quieter and more primitive. So, she readied herself with a shovel, looked Polly in the eyes, and wilted. That little chunky critter would live to see at least another few minutes while mom figured out what to do. She called my sister to try and get her to do the dirty work to no avail. My stepdad avoided the question entirely, rolled up his sleeves, and washed some more dishes. Finally, mom took Polly and the rifle on a little drive to an empty dirt road out in the county. They found a quiet place, mom pulled over, set the trap on the ground, and leveled that rifle point-blank at poor Polly. And in that final moment, mom swung the latch wide, opened the trap, and sent pudgy Polly on her merry way. When it came time, mom just couldn't do it. So now, somewhere in the Ozarks, Polly's telling her pals a tale of abduction, and there's a family that had last-minute store-bought ham for Easter dinner.

There's another fun wrinkle to the Joy of Cooking, by the way. From what I can tell, there've been no fewer than 9 editions. Most of 'em have that famous, basic design, a white background with "Joy" in big red letters. But the second edition from 1936 is very different. The title perches at the top while the rest of the cover's dominated by a woman slaying a dragon. The woman is Martha of Mary & Martha fame. There's this old legend that says after that first Easter, Martha traveled west to spread the Gospel. When she arrived in France, the locals begged her to put that God of hers to use and do something about a pesky dragon attacking boats and people alike. Never one to sit on her heels, Martha armed herself with a bowl of holy water and a cross, found the dragon, sprinkled it with holy water, tied it up with her scarf, and subdued it with the cross. She led it back to the village where the locals disposed of it, and I'm sure, especially if she had the Joy of Cooking at hand, they feasted. I love it that somebody decided that was an appropriate reference to slap on the cover of a cookbook. Martha slaying dragons and feeding God's people. What an incredible witness.

Now, when Jesus appears to his disciples, he makes it abundantly clear that he is no ghost. He's got hands you can touch, an actual body, and he can eat. This actual-bodied Jesus asks for a snack while the disciples navigate their joy-filled confusion. Even the Resurrected Jesus needs a Martha. And then, after he's eaten, Jesus gives them a new identity. No longer just followers, now they're witnesses. A witness sees something happen and crucially tells what they saw. That's Peter in Acts. That's John's love. That's Martha's draconic miracle. I think there's something beautiful to this whole Joy of Cooking - Martha - Jesus thing. Slapping Martha and her miracle on the cover of a cookbook isn't just an interesting bit of trivia. It's an argument in favor of different kinds of witness, or at least Christian witness in unexpected places. We kinda expect dragon slayers and miracle workers to show up. But it's a beautiful thing to see those dragon slayers in dresses, just as likely to overcome adversity as to knead dough.

I guess what I'm interested in today -- legends, myths, facts, and everything in-between -- I'm interested in our stories and what we do with them. We've got lifetimes of stories collected, and we put them to use for all sorts of reasons. Maybe they're fun or silly or serious, but everytime we tell them, we bind ourselves to our hearers in a new way. There's great power in story, so we better make sure we're using them for good, slaying dragons rather than breeding more.

I gotta say, if I were Polly, I'm not sure what story I'd tell. It might be a story of daring escape, or it might be one of unexpected mercy. If Polly believes in Easter, she might just tell a miracle. Whatever it is, Polly's a witness now. And maybe we can be, too. I don't know how many of us are gonna go out and slay dragons with Martha, but nearly everyone here's gonna end up in a kitchen. And maybe in that kitchen you remember Polly and maybe you remember the Joy of Cooking, and maybe, just maybe, you remember dragons and heroic women and a resurrected man thousands of years back. And maybe then you're thinking about our stories, and maybe then you're thinking about God. All these stories, they take our ordinary lives and inject the extraordinary. Silly and funny and deadly serious, they put our everyday experiences in the context of the story

of God and God's people. I know, it may seem silly to imagine a possum or a cookbook as a sign of the sacred, but if you can open your imagination enough to find God there, you can find God just about anywhere.

That's our witness: God is available to us by just about any route. We tell what we've seen, we laugh, we share, we search some more. And in the joy of looking in all those unexpected places, we don't just find another story to tell. Sometimes, sometimes we find God.