

He Opened Their Minds

April 18, 2021

4th Sunday of Easter

Luke 24:36-48

According to Luke, the best way to comprehend the resurrection is through telling stories. This portion of Luke's gospel is the third of four scenes in his resurrection drama.

The first is the discovery of the empty tomb by a group of women -- Mary Magdalene, Joanna, the mother of James, and others. Two men in dazzling clothes tell them that the tomb is empty because Jesus is risen. The women tell the other disciples what they have seen and heard, but Luke says, "... these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them."

Has that ever happened to you? Not taking someone seriously? Has it ever happened to you as a parent when your kids were young, or with your spouse? "It was just an idle tale." Foolishness. Nothing to be taken seriously.

The second scene is the well-known encounter by two disciples, Cleopas and an unnamed companion, meeting the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus. The disciples fail to recognize their companion as Cleopas recounts the events of the last few days to him. They refer to the report of the women, but are obviously unmoved and unconvinced by it. It is not until the Risen One joins them at table that they recognize him and return to Jerusalem to tell the other disciples what they have seen and heard.

The third scene, our lesson for today, unfolds as the story is being told later on about the encounter on the Emmaus road. The Risen Christ appears to the disciples, speaks words of peace, but they do not comprehend what is happening.

Do you see a pattern here? You might be wondering, "Just how dense are these disciples anyway?" Instead of joy, awe and wonder, Luke tells us that they are startled and terrified, believing that they are seeing a ghost!

The Risen One offers two proofs of his presence. He shows them his wounds and offers to let them touch him, and he eats a piece of broiled fish. "A ghost could not eat human food," he might have said. Perhaps this would convince the disciples. However, there is little evidence that the disciples embraced a resurrection faith at that time.

Up until now, everything that points to the resurrection has been met with skepticism, disbelief, and the inability to recognize the Risen One. How incredible. Yet, if they

needed a little time for it all to sink in, maybe we do too. Luke realizes that resurrection faith does not come naturally or quickly.

What must happen before the disciples believe? Luke says that the risen Christ “opened their minds to understand the scriptures.” The resurrection is not an isolated event, but a paradigm or filter for the way in which God works in the world. Your own life can become a walking example of the resurrection.

In order to grasp that concept, the disciples’ minds must be “opened,” and enabled to see the world through the eyes of faith. Resurrection does not prove faith. Faith proves resurrection. There’s a big difference.

The final episode in the resurrection drama is the account of the ascension at Bethany. The Risen Christ blessed them and is carried up into heaven, and only now, the disciples worship him and are filled with joy.

Four times . . . four separate events . . . and slowly the truth begins to sink in. Jesus was finally able to “open their minds,” but it took quite a while.

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It may not be so different for us today. Most of us know people who are closed-minded. For a while, even the disciples were. Some who encountered the risen Lord rejected him. Evidence was ignored.

As Christians and UCC folks, we welcome those who are searching or conflicted about what they believe. All are welcome. No questions asked. The disciples would have been welcome in our midst as they explored their faith and doubt. Doubt and skepticism have its place. We value open mindedness as a church and as a denomination, so we certainly understand differences when it comes to faith. There is no one right way when it comes to belief, but it is helpful to adopt a posture that is open in order to discover what is true for you. Doubt in itself has great integrity.

As a young college student, I considered myself an agnostic for a while. It seemed disingenuous to believe unless there was evidence to my satisfaction, but I maintained an open mind, or at least tried to. What would it take to open your mind?

You heard last week about doubting Thomas. Maybe he got a bad rap. The writer Frederick Buechner said, “If there's no room for doubt, there's no room for me.” Anne Lamotte said, “The opposite of faith is not doubt: It is certainty.” So it is okay that it took the disciples some time to live into this new reality. Life changing events don’t come around very often. It takes time.

My wife bought a bouquet of flowers prior to Easter. The flowers died, and had to be thrown out – all except one. There was an Easter lily in the middle that was closed, and remained so for a couple weeks. Just the other day, it opened up, and it is a beautiful thing to behold. It takes a while. Sometimes faith is like that.

For Luke, there is an open-mindedness that means viewing the world through a faith perspective. I am talking about the kind of open-mindedness Luke describes as he talks about that first Easter evening, and the subsequent appearances you have already heard about.

Were his followers expecting to see Jesus? Hardly. They were startled and frightened. They think they are seeing a ghost. “Look at my hands, my feet,” he says. Touch me. And they still do not believe. He asks them for something to eat. Yet the response here was not one of joy, wonder or awe, but rather fear and disbelief.

But then something happened. Luke says, “He opened their minds so that they could understand the scripture.” Perhaps it happened over a meal. A lot of faith often gets transmitted around the table. Nothing can happen until you open your mind. There is a kind of closed-mindedness that says something cannot be real unless I can see it or touch it, even though Jesus offered exactly that.

The French philosopher Blaise Pascal said, “The heart has its own reasons which reason alone cannot comprehend.” Closed minds do not have enough room for resurrection.

What about us today? Can we see the risen Christ at work in moments of great sacrifice, extraordinary self-giving, suffering or apparent defeat? Can we believe the purpose of God is to bring life to all things – life everlasting?

I don’t know how many of you know about the last words of our dearly departed Richard Walker. His son Alan and wife Denise report that shortly before his death, he was in a liminal space where he seemed to recognize family members and friends who had passed long ago. He had a vision of the beyond, and said, “Wow! For those who want to know, it’s lovely.”

Can I just preach a sermon in one sentence? That would be it! Can we hear God’s voice and see God’s hands at work in our own lives and in our own house? Richard certainly did. His was a resurrection faith.

Sometimes I ask myself what I need to change in myself in order to embrace the fullness of new life that the risen Christ offers. It takes an open mind. I would invite each one of you to do the same. And what is it about a church that needs to change in

order to more closely resemble the risen One? The Church is referred to as “the body of Christ” in the world.

There are no easy answers, but these are very important questions for anyone trying to live a resurrection faith. Easter is about seeing everything in a new way. Everything.

For the disciples it took a willingness to stretch and see things differently, and a meal shared with the risen Lord. They began to see with Easter eyes and an open mind. As we saw, resurrection takes time . . . maybe a lifetime.

There is nothing better than an open mind. As I said at the outset, Luke believes the best way to comprehend the resurrection is to tell stories. Maybe as we tell our stories and listen to one another, we will be convinced too. Amen.

Luke 24:36-48

24:36 While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."

24:37 They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost.

24:38 He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?"

24:39 Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have."

24:40 And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet.

24:41 While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?"

24:42 They gave him a piece of broiled fish,

24:43 and he took it and ate in their presence.

24:44 Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you--that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled."

24:45 Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures,

24:46 and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day,

24:47 and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

24:48 You are witnesses of these things.