Prayer: As we now open your word, O God, open as well our hearts and our minds, that the words we hear may truly be a lamp unto our feet and light for our paths. Amen.

When the risen Christ came and stood among the disciples they were terrified. Not overjoyed, not ready to get the party started—they were afraid. And Jesus said to them, “Peace be with you.” Then he asked them, “Why are you frightened and why do you have doubts in your hearts?”

And then as if to assure them who it was standing in their midst, he shows them his hands and his feet—he shows them his wounds and invites them to touch him. And then, I suppose, in an attempt to make this strange situation seem as normal as possible, he asked them for something to eat and they gave him some broiled fish, which he ate in front of them.

But with those disciples standing there watching him chew, Jesus swallows his last piece of fish and says to them a most interesting thing. “These are my words that I spoke in your presence so that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and psalms might be fulfilled.”

But the text continues, “Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures.”

The author of Luke doesn’t say that he spent hours browbeating them or making them memorize a list of facts or rules. He doesn’t hand them an operations manual or rattle off the codes of moral conduct. He opened their minds—he opened their minds so that they could understand the scriptures.

As a preacher, something like open minds understanding scripture jumps off the page at me in these post-resurrection texts, because all too often I’m afraid, the Bible has been hijacked and held hostage by people with closed minds who believe they’re doing the Bible and the Christian faith a service by calcifying its contents. And I wonder if Luke, in attempting to capture in writing those mysterious events following the death of Jesus on a cross, had the same thoughts as the ones expressed centuries later by theologian Karl Barth, who described the Bible as being endlessly “strange and new.”

Before we can ever claim to know with any degree of certainty, what the Bible is saying, we must first understand what this book is and what authority it has in our lives. When I was young I was led to believe that the Bible was a holy book and it contained God’s truth as it had been handed down from God on High to men, who wrote it all down.

And over the years I’ve participated in many Bible studies that all tended to follow the same pattern. A few verses of scripture are read and the leader maybe throws out a few thoughts in an attempt to stimulate discussion. That’s followed by people eagerly sharing, “What it means to me is….” And most of the time what it means to them has little to do with the scripture itself but is rather a launching off point to talk about something interesting that happened to them. I’m not knocking Bible studies in general, I’m just saying that really studying the Bible is never an easy task.

I have also learned through my own ongoing study of this book over the years, that I have developed a relationship with it—I have fallen in love with this book, with the notion of what it represent and what it affirms
concerning God in relationship with us and with creation. And because I take the study of scripture seriously, I bristle anytime I hear people speak with absolute certainty as to anything it claims.

Karl Barth was exactly right, the Bible is always strange and new, which means that it is not fixed in time or easily exhausted in terms of its content. Rather it is like a script that is read and reread and through which the Spirit always reveals new things. And to begin to understand it one needs to have a relationship with the book.

You have to know the book. Like the important people in your lives, they are important because you have a relationship with them. You know where they are from, you know a good bit about their history—you know their story. You understand what makes them tick and what makes them unique. You get their politics even if you don’t agree with it and you know their fundamental values. And because you know them so intimately, you are more comfortable with some of their ambiguities and seeming inconsistencies. When it comes to those to whom you are the closest, you reserve your judgment and always keep an open mind where they are concerned.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, in describing the Bible’s authority, says,

[The Bible] always outdistances our categories of understanding and explanation, of interpretation and control. Because the Bible is, as we confess, “the living word of the living God,” it will not submit in any compliant way to the accounts we prefer to give of it. There is something intrinsically unfamiliar about the book, and when we seek to override that unfamiliarity we are on the hazardous ground of idolatry (Struggling With Scripture, p.5).

Most people are pretty biblically illiterate, even those who claim to take the Bible seriously. I read not too long ago about a survey of 1000 people who claimed to be people of faith who take the Bible seriously. 38% of them thought the books of both the Old and New Testaments were written a few years after Jesus. 10% of them thought that Joan of Arc was Jonah’s wife!

And then there is the crowd that says, “The Bible said it, I believe it, that settles it.” “The Bible says what it means and means what it says.” But those defensive statements, supposedly lifting up the authority of scripture, end up reducing it to something trite. Such a closed minded approach to understanding scripture is incredibly misguided and furthermore, it is as dangerous as it is simplistic. You should be suspicious any time someone proposes reducing something as complex and multi-layered as scripture, to a bumper sticker.

The Bible may say what it means but that doesn’t mean we know what it says! Not without careful, thoughtful and in-depth study we most likely don’t.

So what was Luke implying when he said that Jesus opened their minds to understand the scriptures? Let’s remember that when the disciples encountered the risen Christ, they were afraid. They were not unlike the way we encounter them in John’s gospel, locked behind closed doors also out of fear. So it’s no stretch, it seems to me, to conclude that fear lies at the heart of all closed minds and doors and that Jesus spent his life trying to open both.

In their fear and confusion, Jesus extended his peace to them and then he opened their minds to new possibilities and new realities and to a new way of understanding the scriptures. And let me say this: A fearful person with a closed mind attempting to interpret scripture poses more potential for error and danger than does a person with an open mind and a deep trust in the Spirit’s leading in providing fresh new learnings from the same old texts.

But we need to be so careful with one another—more careful than we’ve been in the past. Biblical authority and interpretation are at the heart of our life together as Presbyterians, for better or for worse. Many people believe that the problems plaguing the church today have to do with politics in the church. It’s that the mainline
denominations have become too liberal over time—that if we could just stop fighting about gays in the church everything would be ok.

But the issue isn’t gays in the church. It wasn’t women’s ordination in its day nor was it even the institution of slavery in its day that divided the church. The real issue at hand in every major dispute in the church has to do with Biblical interpretation and authority. It’s when two sides square off against each other, each using the Bible to justify why they are right. And anytime someone is right, someone else has to be wrong.

And furthermore, when the northern branch of the Presbyterian Church reunited with the southern branch of the church after splitting over the issue of slavery, time had done much to inform everyone on the evils of slavery, but the fundamental issue of Biblical interpretation and authority was unresolved then and remains largely unresolved now in the Presbyterian Church.

To that end, the Session of this church, along with Westminster in Minneapolis and some other churches around the country, passed an overture to the General Assembly for their action, basically affirming that people of good character can read the same scriptures and come to different conclusions. Therefore, no one has a right to impose their singular view of scripture on the whole church. It asks this coming General Assembly to affirm the following statement,

The 220th General Assembly (2012) acknowledges that faithful Presbyterians earnestly seeking to follow Jesus Christ hold different views about what the Scriptures teach concerning the morality of committed same-gender relationships. Therefore, while holding persons in ordained ministry to high standards of covenant fidelity in the exercise of their sexuality, as in all aspects of life, we decline to take an action that would have the effect of imposing on the whole Presbyterian Church (USA) one interpretation of Scripture in this matter. We commit ourselves to continue respectful dialogue with those who hold differing convictions, to welcome one another for God’s glory, and not to vilify those whose convictions we believe to be in error. We call on all Presbyterians to join us in this commitment (Overture passed by the House of Hope Session at the February, 2012 meeting).

You should know that when the Session of this church read and considered it, many wondered why such a statement was needed. “Don’t all Presbyterians already believe this?” No they don’t, and the angry reaction this overture received at its first reading in our Presbytery, by those most unhappy with the church, bears witness to the fact that indeed some would love nothing better than to impose their interpretation of scripture on the whole church.

But people who have a reverent respect for scripture—people who love the Bible because they have a deep relationship with it, would never want to impose it on anyone, nor would they ever seek to confine it, limit it, override it or use it as a weapon. We’re talking about the living word of the living God and as such it will always be strange and new. And it is always capable of speaking a startling, surprising new word in and for a new day.

But in all of this, please don’t hear me saying that the message of the Bible is ultimately unknowable, or that the Bible is merely a book of abstractions. It is more than that and it is knowable for this Bible addresses you. Your story is written here, your sins and your fears are addressed here. Your hopes are confirmed and your experiences in this life are validated here.

The resurrected Christ opened their minds to understand the scriptures. And as they opened their minds to understand it, they also became the leaders in a new movement carried out in Jesus’ name and on his behalf in the world. They began to see Jesus as the fulfillment of their longed for hope. They more fully understood his life and his sacrifice, as well as the way they continued to experience his presence whenever they were together.
They opened their minds to the teaching of scripture and to the radical belief that God was doing a new thing in the world in and through them because of the ongoing relationship they had with Jesus. And just as they found this new way of being centered on the life of Jesus to provide them with meaning and purpose, hope and assurance in an uncertain world, so did many others.

I know I do. My prayer is that you do as well.

Amen.