

## **“Open Your Mind”**

Luke 24: 36–48

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The House of Hope Presbyterian Church

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### **Fifth Sunday of Easter**

“Worship takes place in a community of redemption. Worship places before God the specific situations of human tragedy, corruption, and hope. Redemption, thus, shapes the environment of worship. The worshiper’s posture is thus one of listening for what disrupts the hold of evil and offers hope for change.” -- Theologian Edward Farley

Confession of 1967, section 9

The one sufficient revelation of God is Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate, to whom the Holy Spirit bears unique and authoritative witness through the Holy Scriptures, which are received and obeyed as the word of God written. The Scriptures are not a witness among others, but the witness without parallel. As God has spoken the divine word in diverse cultural situations, the church is confident that God will continue to speak through the Scriptures in a changing world and in every form of human culture.

### **“Open Your Mind”**

The House of Hope is a member church in the Presbyterian Church USA. There are other Presbyterians: we are Presbyterian Church (USA). And I love the Presbyterian Church (USA), Because of how this particular denomination cares about the Bible.

Wasn’t it Will Willimon who said: “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you ....odd.” We Presbyterians are the odd people of God who believe the Bible is crucial to life.

You know that Line in the TV show, “Big Bang Theory”: Where ultra-nerd Sheldon Cooper is challenged by his roommate Leonard? Leonard says: “Sheldon, for the record, you’re crazy.” With bulging eyes Sheldon replies: “For the record? I’m not crazy. My mother had me tested.”

Well, in all candor? To preach the gospel, my Presbytery had me tested. There is a long history of people wondering if they are crazy in the Christian church. It goes back to the disciples, who thought they were going crazy: that they were seeing a ghost. As the bible clearly indicates: It freaked them out. Then Jesus says: Look at my hands and feet – touch me and see. A ghost does not have flesh and bones.

A few years ago a poet named John Henry wrote a Haiku inspired by the gospel of John. He called it: Johannine Haiku:

The word  
Became flesh  
And dwelt among us and said  
Come and have breakfast

(Theology Today, 1982)

The words most repeated of any words in the Bible: "You got anything to eat?" The Resurrected Jesus concerned with things that really matter: Like breakfast. It is an image of the incarnation. Jesus is hungry not just for food: He is hungry to feed the disciples with the word of God. "Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures..." It is the most beautiful thing: to see a mind open up to the Bible. I had the dean of the history department of a major university. He brought his son to my church for Sunday School. It was clear: they were just there "for the kid." I invited him to our Bible study. With a visible sneer on his face he said, "Oh all right. I'll come. Once." Then he came again and again. 6 months later he said: "I've never heard this before. I hardly have the words to tell my friends." It's a beautiful thing to see someone's mind open up to the Scripture.

But Jesus shows: It is not just a case of picking up a Bible and automatically understanding it. And that's why I love being a Presbyterian: We've been tested. The way we look at Scripture is special. And yes, we know there are brothers and sisters in other denominations in the Christian church who have a very simple ways of reading the Bible. They sport that bumper sticker: "The Bible says it, I believe it, that end's it." The Problem is: there is valid psychological and social testing about SOME ways of interpreting the Bible where you will find: there are ways of reading the Bible that can be destructive. One can end up MORE prejudiced against Jews, against women, against homosexuals, against other religions, against other races. Which is why we takes seriously the line in the Bible that says: "Test the spirits." (1 John 4:4) Presbyterians view the Bible in particular ways. Ours is a thoughtful, disciplined, careful way. We have analytical, scholarly ways of letting Jesus open our minds.

Would you look at your bulletin? At the call to Worship: Our Call to Worship is from our Presbyterian Confession of 1967, which cites: "The one sufficient revelation of God is Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate..." Then later on it refers to: "the word of God written." In the first instance the "W" in Word is capitalized. In the second instance, the "w" in word is typed in small case. That is not a typo. That is a theological statement! It fits so well for a denomination founded by a lawyer (John Calvin.) Does that not make you proud to be a Presbyterian? Capital W is referring to Jesus, the living spirit of Jesus. Small case w is referring to the Bible, which this confession makes clear.

Is not the same as Jesus! It reflects our understanding that the Bible can be used as an idol! People end up replacing the Spirit of the Living Resurrected Christ with the Bible, thereby turning the Bible into an idol. They are listening to it instead of listening for the voice of the living Spirit of Jesus.

Martin Luther was said to have made an indelible impression on his congregation regarding this problem by throwing a Bible down on the floor in the midst of worship and proclaiming: "THAT IS NOT YOUR GOD!" For The Presbyterian church USA, we do not claim that the Scripture is infallible: We claim that it is "unique, and without parallel." The Bible is important, it is crucial, but it is not our God. For us, In the midst of the words of scripture we are looking for and listening for the voice of the living Word of God, the presence of Jesus speaking to us, through the Holy Spirit.

Just because someone quotes the scripture does not end the debate. William Sloane Coffin's asked the discerning question: Do we act as if the Bible is a hitchin' post or a lamp post?" Does it tie you up, or does it give you light for the journey? Jesus took away our sins, not our minds. Jesus INTERPRETS scripture to open our minds. So for Christians, the risk of interpretation is the faithful way of listening to and following our living Lord.

Interpreting the Bible is not about us reading into it our preconceived ideas. Interpreting the Bible is done, first, by knowing some history. What did a bible passage mean when it was originally written? What was its historic, cultural context? What problems was it addressing? What did that words of that language mean? What did the passage mean? Then we have to take a leap of faith in interpreting: given its original meaning, what do we believe is the meaning today? It can be a prophetic task, and needs good scholarship, and good theology.

There are 6 Great Goals that the Presbyterian Church (USA) has: #1: "The proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind." We are looking for the good news that speaks not just to the church, but for all of humankind. Our interpretation of the Bible has to speak to this kind of broad Presbyterian vision. If you look at other religious faiths, you rarely find preaching. Why is it so important to us? I think it is because we take sin seriously. We know it's there. I like to say, we Presbyterians, we don't sin any less. We just enjoy it less.

Edward Farley, a Presbyterian theologian and phenomenologist, thinks about life and sin something like this: Think about seeing a mountainside where the rock has been carved away, So that you can see all the strata of rock, all these layers of different kind of rock. Sediments of the ages all one on top of the other, making a mountain. Life is like that, with seams of sin weaving its way throughout. Sin is like that. Woven into the layers of life are "...social, moral corruption, manifest in malice, dishonesty, hard-heartedness, alienation from others and social oppression."

If you look closely, we are not usually all that aware of it, but sin is sedimented in our lives. In our words, language, phrases, symbols, social structures. It stacks up into layers of our imagination so that we take for granted that our lives are laced with elements of hatred, prejudice, sexism, xenophobia; prejudice toward gays, lesbians, bi-sexual and transgender people; class and social prejudice.

It is sedimented beneath our feet and we traverse upon it every day. It seems normal, but sin runs deep.

For Presbyterians, we take sin seriously. Not as a free floating, vague, disembodied evil. Not a ghost. Sin is embedded in human language social structures and relationships. So Jesus comes along, embodied. He is embodied to redeem our embodied, socially embedded selves. That is why we have sermons. And that is why worship happens every week, and it is why we need to be there every week. Because, as Farley says, in worship we bring our sinful consciousness into the redeeming, transforming presence of God. Worship is not like a walk in the park where I just listen to my own thoughts and, basically, reconfirm what I already believed. Worship challenges and changes us. "In worship, the redeeming presence of God may disrupt the sedimented hold of evil on our imaginations" (Farley).

In worship, we go a little crazy: we hear voices. We hear the choir anthem, which brings us beyond our own self into a transcendent realm. We sing songs with words that offer us a new consciousness. The liturgy connects us with the wisdom of the ages, through profound thinkers who inspire us to be our better selves. The confession confronts us, and makes us wonder if we need to change our minds. And our lives. We hear the Scripture, and the Scripture interpreted. In particular, our experience has been, that Jesus speaks to us there. Presbyterians traditionally believe that, no matter how bad the preacher, if the preacher authentically has studied, worked and tried, through the Holy Spirit, whispers of the living Lord are going to come through. So if the preacher is bad, that's where the congregation has to listen even harder!

We are like the disciples in the Bible. And when we are candid, we can admit, in the midst of worship sometimes Jesus shows up and surprises us. Sometimes Jesus is with us... to open our minds. We do need to say: Interpreting the Scripture always has an element of risk. Because if Jesus is going to open our minds it takes some creative thinking. Did you ever hear Billy Collins poem "Introduction to Poetry"? It's a wonderful poem, with the image of a teacher trying to teach poetry to group of undergraduates. Let me share part of it.

Introduction to Poetry      by Billy Collins

I ask them to take a poem  
and hold it up to the light  
like a color slide  
or press an ear against its hive.  
I say drop a mouse into a poem  
and watch him probe his way out,  
or walk inside the poem's room  
and feel the walls for a light switch....

But all they want to do  
is tie the poem to a chair with rope  
and torture a confession out of it.  
They begin beating it with a hose  
to find out what it really means.

We need to stop tying the Scripture down and beating a confession out of it, and instead, Like Collin's poem says: listen to it. When Jesus is opening your mind to scripture, you probe around until you find the light switch: You hold it up to your ear listen to the bee hive that is part of the land of milk and honey; You hold it up to the light and see the colors of the new creation. And then a door in your imagination opens, and you enter into a new reality.

There was an older woman in one of my churches. She wanted to help prepare me for the day I might be married. She cross-stitched a bible passage for me to hang on my wall. Because what 28 year old man doesn't want a cross-stitch on his wall? Who knows how many hours she spent sewing this beautiful art piece. She started with the Biblical passage that talks about wives obeying their husbands. The specific verse she started with was, "Love, honor and obey." Only this cross-stitchin' lady was not afraid to listen to the Spirit of Jesus in her interpretation. When she was finished, on my wall hung the message: Not: "Love, Honor and Obey" but "Love, Honor, and Negotiate."

That's a Presbyterian for you.

May the Holy Spirit, through the word of God in scripture, open our minds to the LIVING Word of God, Jesus Christ. Amen.