***“Energy, Intelligence, Imagination, and Love”***

**Luke 24:44-53**

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**Ascension/7th Sunday of Easter/May 21, 2023**

One of the interesting things about modern medicine (as it is currently practiced in the United States) is the *rapidity* in which test results are now available.

For example, I recently had my annual physical and (to my great surprise!) the results of my blood tests started hitting my *“inbox”* within a couple of hours of my examination. This used to take several days at best.

My doctor also scheduled me to have an MRI (not to worry—I am perfectly fine). And my MRI results also appeared in my inbox within 24 hours.

The doctor who read the scan of my brain said this (and I quote):

*“Unremarkable examination for age.”*

Now, at first, I took umbrage at this description: *“unremarkable examination for age.”*

But then I realized that this was *“Dr. Speak”* for *“your MRI is normal.”*

All professions, of course, have their *peculiar jargon* that can seem unintelligible to outsiders (and clergy are sometimes the worst offenders in this regard), but without adequate *interpretation,* professional jargon can create serious confusion.

And this is especially true when speaking of *theology* and *scripture.*

For instance, Greg Carey, who teaches New Testament at Lancaster Theological Seminary, says, *“There’s no such thing as pure experience. We interpret our experiences even as they happen, knowing we may tell our story to ourselves or to someone else at any time. No clean division, no gap in time, separates experience from interpretation … Whether the moment is happy or sad, we go into a mode of reflection. We ask, ‘What does this mean?’ We interpret our lives looking backward.”[[1]](#footnote-1)*

And the Ascension story is a case in point.

You see, Luke 24 finds the disciples struggling to understand. Earlier in the chapter, the risen Jesus greets the larger group of disciples. At first, they mistake him for a ghost. When Jesus reveals himself, complete with his wounds, the disciples respond as people do, with a bundle of mixed emotions: *“in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering.”* The disciples need help making sense of this encounter with the risen Jesus. Their joy leaves them both doubtful and amazed.

Jesus (then) helps the disciples understand by *“opening their minds.”* The phrase recalls the earlier encounter on the road to Emmaus (24:13–35). Jesus, risen and incognito, explains the scriptures to two disciples as he will to the rest. *Those two only recognize Jesus when he takes, blesses, breaks, and distributes the bread—a eucharistic moment if ever there were one.* Only then are their eyes *“opened.”*

In other words, Jesus opens the disciples’ minds to understand the scriptures *differently* (in a new way) because reading them a certain way requires starting with new assumptions; namely, reading them through the lens of *his death and resurrection.* And this was new – no one read them that way in Jesus’ day.

The point is that *theology* works backward. We look *back* on our experience through the resources of faith, seeking God’s presence therein. This is how we make sense of life.

It is also how we make sense of *scripture.* We bring our lives, our faith formation, and our communities to it. Faithful interpretation requires having our senses attuned to the work God is doing and has done to redeem our world. It requires reading *backward* from our present to our ancient texts.[[2]](#footnote-2)

And the gospel writer, Luke, is doing this, too.

You see, when we search for Hebrew antecedents to the story of Jesus’ ascension, our attention is drawn to the *Elijah-Elisha* cycle of stories. Elijah also ascended into heaven. Elijah also bestowed his spirit on his successor disciple (2 Kings 2).

Elijah, of course, needed the help of a fiery chariot drawn by magical fiery horses to propel him heavenward. He was also assisted by a God-sent whirlwind to provide additional thrust into the sky.

Jesus, the new Elijah, ascends on his own.

Elijah poured out a double portion of his enormous but still human spirit on his single disciple, Elisha.

Jesus poured out the power of God’s Holy Spirit on the gathered Christian community in sufficient measure to last through all the centuries.

Luke takes the fire from Elijah’s horse-drawn chariot and turns it into tongues of fire (in Acts) that dance on the heads of the disciples without burning them and he takes the propelling whirlwind from the Elijah story and turns it into the *“mighty rushing wind”* that filled the upper room.

The point is that we are not reading literal history; rather, we are watching the gospel writer *paint a portrait drawn from the Hebrew scriptures, designed to present the Jesus experience as an invitation into oneness with God; and in that portrait he uses the only language he has available, the magnificent language of his religious tradition.*

According to the late, great, John Shelby Spong, *“the Jesus story, including the narrative of the resurrection, is an invitation to journey beyond human limits, beyond human boundaries, into the realm of that experience we call God, who is not above the sky, but rather is found in the depths of life. To enter the Christian story we must have our* ***eyes opened*** *to see things beyond the limits of sight, and our* ***ears unstopped*** *to hear music beyond the human range of sound. Our* ***tongues then become loosed*** *so that we can utter the sounds of ecstasy and life itself becomes opened until it is no longer bounded by death. That is the journey the Christian faith bids us begin . . . All of these narrative details were the creation of a community of people who individually and corporately had an experience that they believed was of God in the human life of one Jesus of Nazareth … At the central moment in the Christian story, there was originally something moving and profound, something which transformed life, but it was something that human words could not fully embrace.”[[3]](#footnote-3)*

Which brings us to one of the ordination questions that we will be asking our new Elders in just a few minutes: *“Will you seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?”*

You see, the ascension story serves as *“the hinge”* or *“transition”* between the life of Jesus and *the story of the church.*

And part of the story of the church (as we see in the book of Acts – which was also written by Luke) is that the early church, guided by the Spirit (and confirmed by the community of faith) called people to positions of leadership based on their gifts, talents, and skills.

And that’s what we are doing today—trusting the guidance of the Spirit to provide leaders for the church in this place, in our time.

The reason I have selected this particular ordination question to focus on this morning is because it is more than an elegant turn of phrase—it is, rather, in a nutshell, what the church desperately needs from its clergy, from its elders, from its deacons, from its trustees, from its members and friends: *“energy, intelligence, imagination, and love.”*

Jan Edmiston, the Presbytery Executive for Charlotte Presbytery, breaks it down this way:

1. Ministry is profoundly easier if you have high levels of physical and psychic ***energy.*** The reality of shifting God’s people from a 1950s model of ministry to a 21st Century model of ministry means we serve two congregations at once: the congregation that (finds it hard to) change and the congregation that is willing to allow the Spirit to move in fresh ways.

2. A high emotional ***intelligence*** score helps. Church leaders who need to know-it-all, who are threatened by other talented people, who are not self-aware will not be successful. Good News: Emotional intelligence can be learned.

3. The best leaders are relentlessly ***imaginative***. They imagine a New Church – or the Next Church if you will. They do not settle for a tired narrative. They can see it – that thriving church which is possible if the people are led.

4. ***Loving*** your people is essential. Sometimes we will not like our parishioners very much at all, but if we don’t love them, we’re doomed. Even the really hard-to-love-ones are God’s children, and they are probably nasty because they need love. Authentic, *I-honestly-don’t-care-if-you-aren’t-perfect love.[[4]](#footnote-4)*

Friends, with this in mind, I’ll leave you with this inspiring thought:

Makoto Fujimura, in his book [Art and Faith](https://yalebooks.yale.edu/book/9780300254143/art-and-faith/), talks about *imagination* as both a *pathway* to the *holy* and the *holy* at *play.* *Creativity* is how we can interact with the holy. He writes, *“Our creative intuition, fused with the work of the Spirit of God, can become the deepest seat of knowledge, out of which a theology of New Creation can flow.”* This is what we need today. May it be so. Amen.

1. Greg Carey, *Ascension (Luke 24:44-53),* The Christian Century, May 18, 2022 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. John Shelby Spong, *Jesus for the Non-Religious,* Harper, San Francisco, 2007, pp. 127, 128 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Jan Edmiston, *30 Years of Trying,* A Church for Starving Artists,April 8, 2014 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)