

Then He Opened Their Minds  
Luke 24:13-49

“Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures....”

As far as the disciples knew, Jesus was dead. They knew this because they had seen, with their own eyes, his crucified body, because they had heard, with their own ears, his last words, because with their own hands they had touched his cold flesh as they prepared him for the grave. They knew, the way we know, the difference between life and death.

What was it, then, that changed everything they knew about the death they would die and the life they were destined to live? How did it happen that these who knew the facts the way we know the facts—knew because they had seen with their own eyes, heard with their own ears, felt with their own hands—how did it happen that their minds were opened to know Jesus Christ and the power of his resurrection, as the apostle Paul would later write? How is it that they came to know in him the truth that set them free from the power of death?

Certainly the appearance of the stranger on the Emmaus Road, the same stranger who startled and terrified the eleven like a ghost in Jerusalem, was part of it; and even though seeing, hearing, and touching his resurrected presence almost fit their ways of knowing him before he was dead, something was inconceivably different about knowing him now. Still, this was not even the half of it. In both lessons this morning, we read that the disciples’ minds were opened as Jesus interpreted to them the things about him in all the scriptures; we read that, as he was at table with them and took bread and blessed and broke it, their eyes were opened and they recognized him. Something about God’s living Word interpreting the words of the scriptures, something about this living Presence breaking bread with them changed everything they knew about the death they would die and the life they were destined to live.

The same scriptures are before us this morning and the table and his living presence. How

is it that he had come alongside us too and waits, even now, to open our minds to his living presence and to a wholly different way of knowing that begins with knowing the power of his resurrection?

First we need to get something straight (or slant) about knowing the truth. To ask after truth is not first to set out in search of the facts: the question of truth is a question born of faith. “To be a human being,” says John Leith “is to live by faith. There is no other alternative....The events of life compel us to faith commitments whether explicit or implicit, conscious or unconscious. Each day before we have been up three hours, we have made decisions in the light of some faith commitment about the nature of the universe, about the nature of being human...about the meaning of human life....The difference [in our decisions] lies not in the facts but in the faith, in the light of which the facts are understood.” Make no mistake: scientists no less than preachers live by faith, live in the light of certain experiences or events that reveal to us the real nature of human existence and the world. The prior question then would be: What is the revelatory event or events which will provide the clue to the meaning of all other experiences; what revelation will hold the clue, in the words of H. Richard Niebuhr, “that enables [us] to put together the disparate experiences of life into a meaningful, coherent whole, to see a pattern and purpose in human history, to overcome the incongruities between what life is and what life ought to be.”

The story of the road to Emmaus is a story about the faith in the light of which the truth of human existence is understood; a story about the revelatory experience which has provided Christians with the clue to the meaning of every other experience since Jesus was raised from the dead. Hidden in this story is a different way of knowing. Listen again: two of the disciples were on the way back to the human condition unredeemed, talking with each other about all these

things that had happened, trying to understand their lives in the face of a devastating death. They were talking as we talk on the road to nowhere in particular: talking about what we should make of the troubles we've seen, of a friend's premature death, of problems at the office or a series of strange instances that have led us to question our direction or of the reason beneath some unwarranted suffering or if there were something more behind a chance encounter. We talk about these things on the way to the grave.

Now and again, we may even stumble upon some reasonable explanation that seems to make sense of the disparate facts--a plot, of sorts—a psychological analysis that rings true and resonates with our unconscious or a chance alignment of the stars, say, leading us to believe fate controls this tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. We take the disparate facts of our days and we talk together about what they could mean, where they could be going, why life has happened to us in this way, how we keep on keeping on.

But again, here is the incredible coincidence in the two scenes before us this morning. Luke tells us that on the road to Emmaus and in the upper room, the turning point came when Jesus interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures; when he opened their minds to understand the scriptures beginning with the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms. It seems to me that the revelatory experience which provided them with the clue to the meaning of all the other experiences of their lives was the word interpreted through him who was dead and is alive; the word understood as it turned them toward him! So it was and so it is that his surprising presence opens our minds to a way of knowing the truth born of faith.

The problem is that we talk together about what might be the revelatory experience for us without ever having cracked the binding of the book we have been given or having turned to his presence among us. "I believe," says Caleb in the midst of narrating the story of his family's life

lived East of Eden, “that there is one story in the world, and only one....Humans are caught--in their lives, in their thoughts, in their hungers and ambitions, in their avarice and cruelty, and in their kindness and generosity too--in a net” of one story. That story is what the church calls Scripture and, according to Robert Jenson, “The church reads her Scripture as a single plotted succession of events, stretching from creation to consummation, plotted around Exodus and Resurrection.” “Give me a used Bible,” says Caleb's friend Samuel a bit later on, in response, “and I will, I think, be able to tell you about a [person] by the places that are edged with the dirt of seeking fingers. Liza,” he adds, “wears a Bible down evenly.”

My guess is that most of us wear a Bible down not much at all; or if we do, we wear it down using it for what it is not: a set of rules, a collection of sayings, a ancient text about religion, a compendium of inspiring literature, and miss the revelatory experience that it mediates, the story whose plot determines our days, the tale told not by an idiot but by an Almighty Author who has written himself into the story in the person of Jesus Christ. Would that the dirt of our seeking fingers were all over these words that tell us of him and so of the human being we were born to be. Would that the dirt of our seeking fingers were evenly spread across these pages which unfold a plot more merciful than we can ask or imagine.

Back then to its pages, to the Emmaus road and to these two characters who have seemingly lost the thread of the plot, as we have. Another character joins them, the same character that joins us as the dirt of our seeking fingers turns the page. "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" he asks of us all. Truth be told, without him we have no clue about these things we have been discussing--no clue about the things we have been taught, the stories we have been told, the miracles we have witnessed, the words he had said, the death from which we still flee. But most of all, we have no clue that he has joined us on the road of our

human condition.

Astonished that he does not know the facts about the recent tragic turn in their lives, the tragic turns in our own, we begin to tell him the immediate story, the story of a prophet rejected and crucified, the story of our dashed hopes, of our unbelief, the fact that it is now the three days—actually three weeks since Easter Sunday--and, though the women saw a vision and said he was alive, we cannot say, for a fact, that we have seen him. *Really!*

Again, Jesus says to them even as he now says to us, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!” Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interprets to us the things about himself in all the scripture; beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he tells us the plot of God’s loving purposes in human history. I repeat: “Revelation is [the] clue that enables [us] to put together the disparate experiences of life into a meaningful, coherent whole, to see a pattern and purpose in human history, to overcome the incongruities between what life is and what life ought to be.”

In other words, as we find ourselves on some Emmaus road talking together about the incongruities of our lives, this one who joins us and listens *is* the revelatory experience, the One in whom and through whom all things hold together, the One by whose life, death and resurrection our minds are opened-unless it should happen, ages and ages hence, that religion should close our minds in his name. But that is another sermon! By faith, we may see what without him we could not see: the light which follows darkness, the life which follows the defeat of death, the promised land which awaits us as we plod through the wilderness of our exodus or exile, the father--way at the end of the road we are on--whose embrace is ours for the turning.

The claim of the Christian faith and of the church throughout the ages is unequivocal: in this story, the reality of our life and our death cohere with the reality of God's person and

purpose and promise. The question that remains is whether we will spend our days in lively engagement with its Author, in common pursuit of the chapters yet to be written in our own lives, in daily gratitude for the companionship afforded us by its ragtag characters, in some degree of humility given the bit part we have been asked to play as undeserving members of God's eternal cast? Or will we go on living as though our human existence were a tale told by an idiot signifying nothing? To choose the former is, in the words of Jenson, to choose to "hang out with Scripture, on a particular corner, the corner where there is a little crowd gathered around someone telling about the Resurrection."

But it is getting on toward evening and, given another long sermon, the day is now well spent. If, as the story goes, those who think this all to be a tale signifying nothing were to be invited in and gathered around some table...say, this table...and if, as the story goes, bread were broken...well, I don't want to ruin the ending. Best we keep reading, trusting that his living Presence will open our minds to understand.