

4-18-21
Easter 3
Luke 24:36b-48

How Open?

It will soon be graduation time again. Hopefully, that will bring celebrations a little closer to normal than those we experienced last year. We'll celebrate with our graduates next month, and I know their families and friends are already planning celebrations, too. When those celebrations roll around, I always think about a woman named Opal Frakes. None of you knew Mrs. Opal, but I'll bet you know someone like her. Mrs. Opal was not a volunteer in youth ministry. But she always cared about the youth of the Church. Every year, she hosted a luncheon at her home for the graduating seniors in the Church. It was a big deal. Get all dressed up. Get a lecture about what to do with the napkins and which fork to use first. Hope you remembered it all when you got there. I don't remember what we had to eat in the spring of 1970 when it was my turn to go to Mrs. Opal's luncheon. I'm sure it was good and that she had worked hard on it. But I do remember the speech. We had all been told about it. She made it every year.

After the lunch was over, the napkins were folded, and we knew better than to ask for seconds, even of the pie. Mrs. Opal stood at the head of the table to make her speech. She talked about how proud she was of all of us and how excited she was to hear about what we were going to do next. Most of us were going on to college. A few had other plans, but we were all going to do something. Mrs. Opal spoke most directly to those of us who were going on to college. She wanted that to be a good experience for us. But she had a warning. There were people in those colleges to which we were headed who would want to teach us things she didn't want us to know. She wanted us to remember the things we had learned in Sunday School. But she

didn't want us to pay much attention to those professors who would have other things to say to us.

I learned many good things in Sunday School. And I learned them mostly from people who loved me, people who wanted me to know that God loved me, too. That started with Inez Ragland who managed to find pictures that depicted whatever Bible story she was teaching for us to color when we were little, and it extended to the people who put up with us as young people. There really wasn't anything I had learned in Sunday School that I didn't need to keep and treasure. Of course, I had no idea what Mrs. Opal was talking about about those professors and the things they would have to say, but I wasn't worried about it. I didn't tell her that, of course. I wrote a polite thank you note like good, Southern kids are trained to do, and celebrated graduation, probably in ways that Mrs. Opal didn't need to know about, and began to make plans to go see what she was so worried about.

It didn't take long for me to find out. I went to a state school only a little over an hour from home, but that was the longest seventy-five miles I had ever travelled. College was the most mind-broadening experience I had had at that point in my life. That was followed by graduate school which did even more of that hard work. And Seminary was anything but a Sunday School refresher course. Each of those degree programs presented me with things to think about and ways to think about them that were much different than I had learned at home or in school or in Sunday School. Some of the challenges I encountered were difficult, and some of them were probably a normal part of growing up. But the foundation of God's love and care for me that had been instilled by well-meaning people like Mrs. Opal withstood whatever challenges all those new people and new ideas threw at me.

I guess all of those people who taught me in those earliest years are gone now. Some of those smart-alecks I encountered in college are, too. Some of the things that all of them taught me

wound up being helpful, and some of them got discarded along the way. I'm glad Mrs. Opal is not here to hear that.

One of the things that made Jesus such a force to be reckoned with when he lived among us was that he was a lot like those folks Mrs. Opal warned us about at college. He was constantly pushing the limits. Giving people new things to think about, new ways to experience God's love and care, and new ways to think about things people thought they knew. Even his closest friends, the ones we call the disciples, were not always, or even often, sure about what he was saying and what it meant.

After the events of what we call Holy Week, those guys and others who followed Jesus were even more confused. That's what they were talking about when we pick up their story from Luke's Gospel today. Jesus had taught them all the things he wanted them to know in as many ways as he could to help them understand for as long as they had been together. He had told them flatly that he would die and that he would live again. They had seen him die. That part they understood. They had heard that strange story from the woman who had gone to the tomb and found it empty. But they were still not sure what it all meant. It simply didn't fit in the framework of what they had been taught and what they had come to believe. And then comes today's encounter.

While they were all there together, Jesus came and stood among them. "Peace be with you!" he said. He was surprised and maybe a little frustrated that they were surprised to see him. Had their time together done nothing to help them understand? Had they heard nothing that he had tried to tell them? Were they so locked into what they had understood that they couldn't wrap their minds about this new thing? Were they unable to trust the promises he had made to them?

There are a couple of almost comical scenes while Jesus patiently continues to teach and to guide. First, he insists that they touch him. I don't believe in ghosts, but I've seen enough silly ghost movies to know that what Jesus said is right: ghosts don't have bodies. They're spirits. But Jesus offers them his

hands and his feet, wounds and all, to prove to them that he is risen to new life, not some spiritual, hard to define existence, but risen to life! And, in case that didn't convince them that they were going to have to broaden their thinking, he reminded them that they hadn't offered him anything to eat. Ghosts don't eat! Hard to do without an intestinal tract! But Jesus was hungry. Rising from the dead apparently uses a lot of energy! So they offered him what they had, some broiled fish, and he ate it and they all saw it.

None of that squared with anything they had ever been taught before, except by him. None of that squares with much that we think we know outside the Church. People who are dead tend to stay that way. That's what makes death so painful for us. Like all faithful people, they had waited all their lives for the One God would send to save the world to come. They knew they had met up with something important in Jesus, and they had eventually sort of come to believe that he was that One. But he surely didn't act much like the One they were expecting. Of course, they were expecting what they were expecting, what they thought they knew and understood. That's why what comes next is so important to them and to us.

While Jesus was continuing to nudge them along, Luke says that he opened their minds and helped them understand the Scripture. Opened their minds.

That's sometimes a scary prospect. A closed mind is much easier to manage. A mind that has had all the right things poured into it and then sealed off so that none of those things will be disturbed. A Mrs. Opal kind of mind is a lot easier to manage than one that's left open to new ideas and new ways to fit them into the ones that are already in there. There was no place in the faithful mind for people being raised from the dead. But Jesus did it. And then it happened to him. That called for reevaluating everything that was in anyone's minds.

I'm thinking about a woman who will remain nameless. I think she's dead, and I don't think any of you know her or anyone who knew her, but we'll leave names out of it. She lived a very conventional life. Wife. Mother. Faithful to the Church. Worked

outside her home and then came home and worked the job that waited for her there. Did all the things her family, her job, and every other part of her life needed her to do. You might say she knew her place. She had always been faithful to the church, but she started coming to a Bible study group she hadn't participated in before. And there she discovered a place where she could ask questions she had had for years, but didn't know she could ask. She read and studied. She came week after week with more questions and then came back the next week with more. She found herself thinking about things and in ways she had never done before. And she liked it. She started speaking up more—not just in the safety and security of that study group, but at home and at work and in other places. People began to talk about what was going on with her. Something was different. She had been there for years, and no one paid much attention, but now it was hard not to. She had found her voice, and she had decided that it needed to be heard. That didn't happen overnight, of course, but gradually, she began to open her mind to possibilities she had never considered before. She bought herself a study Bible and she told her grandkids she'd order them a pizza on their night to eat supper with her instead of spending all afternoon in the kitchen. That gave her more time to read and to think. She still cooked for them sometimes, but not every time. She also told some of the family that they could help with Sunday dinner sometimes so she could go to Sunday School. This went on for a while, and sometime in that process, her pastor accepted a call to another church. That was a big blow to her, because she wasn't sure whether her study group would continue after he left. She went to talk with him about it and you know what he suggested: why didn't she lead it? As broad as her thinking had become, it hadn't broadened quite that much yet. And then her son-in-law went to see the preacher, too. He wasn't part of that study group. He came to say that if the preacher was bent on leaving, he might ought to take his mother-in-law with him. They liked the world a lot better before she got so broad-minded. All this new thinking

had made her a different person, and they weren't sure what they were going to do with her!

That's the danger when Jesus opens your mind, and you begin to understand the Scripture. Walls tumble. Expectations change. Roles get reversed. Things you thought you understood get thought through again. And sometimes they come out differently than they went in.

What Jesus would have called Scripture is not the stories about him. It would be what we call the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scripture. Those can be pretty scary to us sometimes, but when we realize that they are part of one story, the story of God's love for us, we learn to read that whole story through what we know about Jesus. That whole story is the story of God's redemptive presence with us throughout all of history. Once we learn that opening our minds is what God wants to do because that's how we learn how much he loves us, both Scripture and life become much less fearsome and much more hopeful.

An open mind is a sure sign of God's presence in it. If we close our minds to things we don't understand or to those we think we do and just don't like, we run the risk of closing them to God as well as to all the things Mrs. Opal was afraid we'd learn. Jesus opened their minds so they could understand the Scripture. And he will open ours if we will entrust them to him. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Prayers of the People

Holy God, we heard today how the Risen Christ opened the minds of the first disciples to understand the Scripture and how that gave them power to walk boldly in the world to bring Good News. Now we pray that you will continue to open the minds of your people and your Church, including us. Open us to the healing, wisdom, and faith your Word promises, and help us to share what we come to understand with people who are still searching.

Jesus showed his friends what they needed to see to be able to trust in him and in you. Help us to be signs of your presence in the world so that people may see in us the things they need to see to believe. Help us to see our own wounds and the wounds of those around us, the fears that hold us back and the fears that keep people from joining us in worship and in service. Help us to be avenues of healing for ourselves and for others.

We beg for peace among the nations. We pray for peace in our own community, for peace within families, congregations and other places where we gather to do your will. Guide leaders and those who follow to serve your will. Help us to live so that all may thrive and prosper and none may be left without.

Shine your light on us and through us, O God. Reveal the things that darkness hides so that we can bring them into your healing light. Help us to share the needs of our own hearts so that we can claim your healing for ourselves and then share it with others. Help us to believe that life comes from death and that life everlasting is your promise.

We pray today for all who are in need, for all who are displaced or hungry or fearful. For rescue workers and medical teams that respond to need, for all who are weary, weary from their own load and weary from carrying the loads of others, especially the loads some heap on them. Help us to show the world the power of faithful community. Help us to give hope to the hopeless and the frightened. Keep us mindful of the needs of those for whom we pray today, remembering that they will still need our prayers tomorrow.

You have told us to bring our deepest desires to you, O God. So hear us now as, in silence we speak to you about the deep needs we carry with us, trusting you to hear and to respond.

(silence)

Hear us, O God, for your mercy is great, and your love for us is everlasting. Trusting in your never-failing mercy, O God, we trust into your care all these for whom we pray and many whose needs we do not know. We entrust ourselves into your care, believing that your promises are sure. We pray all these things through

Jesus Christ the Risen Lord, who opens both our minds and our hearts and who taught us to pray when he said: *Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever and ever.*
Amen