

Sermon for April 22, 2018 – “True Understanding”

Fourth Sunday after Easter Year B – Text: Luke 24:36-49

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Today’s gospel reading, contains some elements of our gospel readings from the last few weeks. First, as we heard from John’s Gospel last week that on that first Easter, Jesus appeared to His disciples and showed them the marks engraved in His hands and feet and in His side. Second, we hear again where, like the two travelers on the road to Emmaus, Jesus reminded His disciples of what He’d said before He died and opened their minds so they could understand the scriptures. He does so telling them: **“This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day...and repentance and forgiveness of sin will be preached in His name to all nations...beginning in Jerusalem.”** He opened their minds so they could understand the scriptures. I’ve thought a bit about this and wonder: Why didn’t Jesus do this earlier? Why didn’t Jesus open their minds to understand the scriptures and then explain it to them **before** He died? It certainly would have made it easier for them, easier to believe in Him and follow Him. And, it definitely would have made it easier to accept the miracle of His resurrection. If only they would have understood the scriptures, but they **didn’t**. The question is: why? Why did Jesus **wait** to open their minds so they could understand scriptures and thus understand Him? I believe the answer lies in the fact that the disciples had to **experience** the reality of Jesus’ death and resurrection before they could really **understand** the Bible. Their hearts and minds couldn’t be opened, they couldn’t possibly understand until they were prepared for it by all of what they’d heard, seen, and felt with Jesus.

There’s a story that’s told about an explorer returning from the Amazon. The people at home were eager to learn all about the mighty river and the country surrounding it. But how, he wondered, could he ever describe it to them in a way that would begin to describe what it was actually like to be there? So, after thinking about it the explorer did what all good explorers do. He told everyone to “go and find out for yourselves what it is like.” To help them he drew a map pointing out the various features of the river and describing some of the dangers. The people took the map and framed it, hanging it on the wall of the local museum for all to see. Some made copies of it. Over time, many of those who made copies for themselves considered themselves experts on the river, and indeed instructed others, but they never actually saw and experienced it for themselves. I think there are lots of folks like that today. They can quote the bible by heart, chapter and verse, but don’t understand it. Their passivity concerning scripture prevents their understanding because they fail to connect it to their everyday experiences and vice-versa. They haven’t entered into the wholeness of the message. Rather, they accept some parts and either reject, or ignore others without ever considering the connections **between** the parts.

Indeed, a lot of us are like the disciples before Easter Sunday. We shrink away from much of what Jesus says, not wanting to hear the harder stuff. You know, the stuff about picking up our cross/following Him, about giving up family and home for the sake of the gospel. It wasn’t good news to the disciples and it isn’t good news to us. We can’t see how or why it might be important for us so, we either downplay its significance or ignore it altogether.

No, for lots of us, like the disciples the good news, the **welcome** news, consists of hearing stuff that comforts us, proves a particular point, or affirms a particular position or belief we hold. We don't let it challenge us even in the slightest. But we can't have it both ways. We can't pick and choose which parts of the Bible suit us and which don't any more than we get to choose which parts we respond to and which we ignore! But there's something more to all this. I believe that there's a connection, a deep connection, between our faith experiences that is, the faith that we live out every single day, and our **understanding** of that faith. Between what we read in the Bible and how we live as Christians. Paul says as much in his letter to Philomen when he says: "**I pray you may be active in sharing your faith so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.**" What Paul is saying, is that being active, living faithfully by sharing one's faith, serving others, giving, being involved in the church and its ministries and so forth, leads to greater understanding of our faith and a more mature, resilient faith for future living. This is about a greater understanding of the Bible, what it's trying to teach us and a greater, deeper, understanding of our faith in general. Because, it's in the process of being involved that we have what you've heard me call "God moments." Moments where our faith suddenly and inexplicably comes alive. Where it becomes real, real in every sense of the word. Until we understand all of that, until our minds are opened to see the connection between what we are now and what we can and actually intended to be, between what we experience now and what it's **possible** to experience, until we see the links between death and resurrection, the Bible is and will remain a closed book. That's why Jesus didn't open His disciple's minds sooner. They had no **frame of reference** for understanding. Until He rose they didn't have the **experience** needed to have open minds. Until He rose the link between death and resurrection existed in their minds only as an unpleasant idea, not a glorious reality. Friends, Jesus' life, death and resurrection is the link between our experience and the message of the Bible. He's the link that can open our minds so that we might understand not only the Bible but our own lives.

That first Easter, Jesus didn't give His disciples special knowledge. He didn't give them secret decoder rings, something that allowed them to unlock special codes hidden in the texts. No, what He did was open their minds. He reminded them of what they'd experienced with Him, of what they were even then experiencing with Him and He pointed to the scriptures which spoke of that experience. He made the connections for them!

Friends, we understand the scriptures **and** their message when we know both Jesus' death and His resurrection in both our faith in Him and in the faith that we live out every day. To know and understand it you have to live it. It's just that simple. I say simple, but not easy. There's a story often told to illustrate today's scripture reading. You may have heard it before. It tells of grandparents in a gift shop looking for a birthday present for their granddaughter. Suddenly the grandmother spots a beautiful teacup. "Look at this lovely cup," she says to her husband. He looks and says, "You're right, it is beautiful!" At that point, the teacup says to the grandparents, "Thank you for the compliment but I wasn't always beautiful." Instead of being surprised the cup can talk the grandmother asks: "What do you mean?" "Well," said the teacup, "once I was just an ugly, wet lump of clay. "But one day a man with dirty, wet hands threw me on a wheel. Then he started turning me around and around until I got so dizzy I couldn't see straight. "Stop! Stop!" I cried but the man said, 'not yet!' Then he started to poke me and punch me until I hurt all over. 'Stop! Stop!' I cried, but the man said, 'not yet!'"

“Finally, he did stop. “But then he did something much worse. He put me into a furnace. I got hotter and hotter until I couldn’t stand it. ““Stop! Stop!” I cried, but the man said, ‘not yet.’ “Finally, the man took me out of the furnace and gave me to some short lady who began to paint me. The fumes got so bad I felt sick. ““Stop, stop!” I cried, but the lady said, ‘not yet!’ “Finally, she did, but then gave me back to the man who put me back into that awful furnace. “This time it was hotter than before. ‘Stop! Stop!’ I cried, but the man said, ‘not yet.’ “Finally, he took me out of the furnace and let me cool. “When I was completely cool a pretty lady put me on this shelf, next to this mirror. “When I looked in the mirror, I was amazed. “I couldn’t believe it. I was no longer ugly, soggy, and dirty. I was beautiful, firm, and clean. I cried for joy. It was then I realized that all the pain was worthwhile. Without it I’d still be an ugly lump of wet clay. In that moment, all the pain I’d experienced took on meaning for me. The pain had passed but the beauty it brought has remained.”

Scripture tells us that, “**like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in My hand.**” It tells us also that, “**we are now children of God. What we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when He appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see him as He is.**” Jesus waited to open the minds of His disciples because that’s all He **could** do. The story was incomplete without the resurrection. The disciples couldn’t **understand** scripture until they’d **witnessed** it. And here, brothers and sisters, is the thing. Like the disciples, we too cannot fully understand scripture until our minds have been opened by our experience in living out our faith. It isn’t just about faith alone for faith’ sake, nor is it about reading the Bible for its own sake. You, see, without going out and encountering people, loving our neighbor as we’ve been commanded to do, we’re like the people who studied the Amazon but never actually went there. We can know a lot about God but never understand God or experience all He has in store for us. Understanding and experiencing go hand in hand. We can know all the Bible stories, and all the facts. All the names, places and dates. We can be able to quote various and sundry passages and sprinkle them throughout our conversations. We can familiarize ourselves with all the commentary all that’s been written about it. But, it will never in and of itself give us the **understanding** that God wants us to have. If we really want to know what the Bible’s really all about the first thing we need to do is actually **open** it. That’s just a small first step. Then we must allow the Spirit to open our minds and help us see it in a new way. To consider the context, to understand who wrote it, to whom it was written and why, to go deeper to its meaning and see it as an account of human beings encountering and engaging God and struggling to understand these encounters. Wrestling with who God is and what God’s purposes are. Grappling with what He’s doing around them, in them, and through them. To allow that story to resonate within us. To consider how (not if) their experience might be like our own. To consider how (again, not if), we’ve experienced the divine presence in our own lives. What this God is doing around us, in us, and through us. We begin by surrendering our own understanding and opening our minds. By placing our trust in the One to whom all of scripture points, the One who is the lens through whom through all of scripture is understood. But we mustn’t stop there. We must go further still by becoming part of that on-going story by allowing the same Spirit that inspired the authors of scripture and who inspires us in our reading and hearing to inspire us to seek out **new** experiences. By following Jesus’ example, by living faithfully, by bearing witness in the world, encountering and engaging others to the story of which we as the Church are a part. By inviting those who have yet to hear the story and to become a part of it.

Then (and only then) will we, like the Amazon explorer and the clay in the potter's hands, **truly** understand. Only then will we praise God for that understanding. Only then will we praise God for the life, the **new** life, hat He's given us in Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God.

He is risen indeed!

Amen and amen.