

“What it Takes to Open our Eyes”

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Scripture Luke 24:13-25

Every time my family passes a Bed, Bath and Beyond, we then read any store name we see by adding “and beyond” at the end. Some of our favorite combinations around McLean have been: “Chopt and beyond” “Organic Butcher and beyond.” “7-11 and beyond” is a more accurate name since 7-11 is actually open 24-7. On Easter we do something similar with the Paschal Greeting, “Christ is Risen, Christ is risen Indeed!” By repeating emphatically any statement: “Francisco Lindor is the best baseball player.” “Francisco Lindor is the best baseball player, Indeed!” “We ran out of milk” “we ran out of milk, indeed!” The more boring the sentence the greater gusto of response - which is on purpose - because every statement we would ever repeat with an “Indeed” is never as worthy a use of our breathe as Christ is Risen Indeed.

That is where our scripture for today ends – Christ is Risen Indeed, actually says that, “The Lord is Risen indeed.” Eyes are opened disbelief turns to belief and the disciples on the road and the disciples in the house witness together of experiencing the risen Lord, “Indeed, we have seen him too.” That is where it ends, but not where it starts. It begins with two of them – Jesus followers, not the 12, leaving Jerusalem with a great need to talk about all that has just happened there, but without a great deal of clarity for what it all means.

They know the women reported an empty tomb and angels who said he was alive and that friends of theirs saw the empty tomb as well, but it has been three days, and nothing quite like they expected has happened yet. There is great irony in their line of lament about this: “we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.” I wonder exactly what Jesus’ face looked like when they said that line to him, not knowing it was Jesus! and I can understand how Jesus’ first words to them were about foolishness, and hearts slow to believe. But I can also understand Cleopas and his friend’s inability to see clearly, to not connect the dots in the story that seem so obvious to us but must have looked like random plot points to them, and how their hearts are both closed and slow.

There is so much unmet expectation for them. They had a vision of what redemption would be like and how it would mean an end to everything that was oppressive in their political system maybe they hoped it would usher in an era where things weren’t so challenging and hard in everyday circumstances. And it has been three days, so their expected timetable has run past as well and they leave the city with a disillusionment of hope. It might be the inverse of how much they had hoped and how disappointed they feel that is keeping their eyes from seeing. We know too that disappointment dims and distorts our vision.

That same combination of great hope, then unmet expectation of that hope in terms of a certain outcome and timetable, often leads us down an Emmaus road of narrowness of vision and hearts slow to believe. Even when, like these two, we have read the scriptures and we know what is prophesied and promised. Even when, like these two, others have shared their own experiences of redemption and resurrection with us. We may even believe that it worked that way for them; we just can't see it that way in our situation. Maybe in times like this, on days like this, we have needed to narrow our lens because we are too exhausted by challenge and struggle to have the energy to raise our heads for a broader view.

Maybe on the 7th Sunday of our worshipping apart and school cancellation and many, many weeks into a stay-at-home order, it feels something like this. What felt full of hopeful energy and making the best of it - family time, home organization, sewing masks, Zoom book clubs, has been replaced by an abiding diminishment of energy and spirit and a disillusionment of unmet timetables and unfulfilled expectations builds fatigue and frustration. We know the words of promise in scripture, we know the stories of good news and redemption, but may have a harder time connecting all of that past experience to the energy we need for each day. Even if we raise our heads high enough, open our eyes wide enough, to see that Jesus is walking along beside us, can we connect the dots to see how that actually helps us with what is hard right now?

Here are some things that are hard – most of us know someone who has been sick and someone who has died, most of us know someone who is struggling at home and someone who is struggling as an essential worker, most of us know someone who lost their job and someone who was furloughed, and some of us are one of those things and some of us are more than one. This scripture becomes good news to people who are trying to see clear enough to connect all of these things that have never happened before in our lifetime to the promises of scriptures and the experience of the risen Christ.

This scripture helps us connect in two ways. First, it reminds us that Jesus is more with us more than we can see right now, maybe than we will ever see in our lifetime until we meet face to face. And when we know that Jesus is with us, that means we are never alone, that we are held in hands that are as forgiving as they are strong, and that we will be loved in whatever is hard, and loved all the way through it.

Second, we can encounter Jesus by even small acts of faithfulness. These two disciples only had an experience of the risen Christ after a small detail of the passage large in comedy and significance. They reach Emmaus, Jesus pretends to be going on ahead, but then they ask him to stay. Not because they knew it was Jesus, but because that was the right thing to do. To open your table, even when you feel more narrow. To share what you have to give, even when your spirit feels more empty. If they hadn't invited him, he wouldn't have sat at the table with them, and they wouldn't have had their eyes opened when he did the list of verbs associated with Jesus throughout his life: take, bless, break and give. The list of verbs associated with Jesus upon his death, broken to give – the gift of a redemption more powerful and complete than anything these two might have expected.

To open their eyes to Jesus they opened their eyes to the needs of a stranger on the road. Not in an anti-self care way, where you need to push yourself past your limits, but as the Spirit helps you find whatever capacity your open eyes, ears, voice and heart show you to have. If we want our eyes opened to notice rolled away doors from our own tombs, and hearts strengthened to walk out of them into new life, a first step in encountering the Risen, Servant Lord is by serving.

Which this beloved LPC community has been doing in abundance: Pastor Scott shared that the One Great Hour of Sharing fund received \$5,500 and the Deacon Fund several thousands of dollars of contributions, and Mission partners specifically thanked LPC for responding to their calls for help, and people are serving not just with donations but doing everything they can amongst constraints of social distancing, shopping for each other, calling and writing notes, holding each other in prayer. And just like for the disciples on the road, all the stories of what you all are doing to care for each other make my heart burn within me and say that Christ is Risen indeed and in your deeds, especially when it takes extra energy and clarity of sight.

In this passage: Hearts that are slow to believe become hearts that burn with faith. Eyes that couldn't see the Lord standing right in front of them become opened in a way that they will never again be as fully closed as they were. Minds are opened to the scripture and how it guides us for the living of these days and how unmet expectations may be dots that Jesus is even now pulling together for your restoration and redemption and beyond. What better reason to open our voices and proclaim together, Christ is Risen, Christ is Risen, Indeed!