

Still Wondering

Luke 24:36b-48

April 18, 2021

First Presbyterian, Luling

Our fifth grade daughter has been working on a speech all week, on the explorer Vasco da Gama. In case your fifth grade memory is a little too far in the past to recall, he was a Portuguese explorer who was the first European to go to India. Rachel was only vaguely interested in Vasco da Gama, but she became quite energized by the idea of giving a speech. She even went so far as to ask my advice on public speaking, because she knows I preach sermons all the time. She's at the age where I rarely qualify as an expert in any arena, so this was pretty exciting to me, too. Her teacher had told them about "hooks" in speeches, so she came downstairs to ask if I used "hooks" in my sermons, that is, stories, jokes, or other things to get the audience's attention and keep them interested. I suppose I do, though I've never used that terminology to describe it. "Yes," I told her, "I often start out with a story."

So it's particularly embarrassing this week to not have a good hook. Or a bad hook. Or really any way that I've thought of to engage our attention right away in this post-resurrection story from Luke. As I write this, I'll just hope that Rachel is not listening to this particular sermon, because she'll probably end up rating it as boring.

This isn't a passage that we read very often. It's similar in a lot of ways to the story of Doubting Thomas, which appears in the lectionary every single year, though I avoided preaching on it last week, because I knew this passage was coming this week. And it also parallels, in structure, the story of the disciples on the Emmaus Road, which comes immediately before it.

The group of disciples who had been closest to Jesus are still gathered together in Jerusalem. It is apparently very late on Easter Sunday evening. They are talking with the pair of disciples who has encountered Jesus on the Emmaus Road earlier that day, without realizing at first who he was. Jesus had interpreted the Scriptures—the books of Moses and the prophets—and what they meant about him, but they still didn't realize who he was until they had sat down to eat and he broke the bread. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him. They rush right back to Jerusalem and are telling all of the other disciples about this very thing when—poof!—Jesus appears right in their midst.

Then it takes about seven verses for the disciples and Luke to establish that it really was Jesus, not a ghost, and that the resurrected Jesus has a real human body. This was important to Luke's first audience because there were already rumors and speculations going around that the resurrected body of Jesus was just an apparition, not something solid and real, not a real human body.

He then reminds him of what he taught them when he was alive the first time, and then Luke says, "He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures." At first I just skimmed over this, thinking it was the same thing as the Emmaus story, but then it hit me as a little bit odd. "Opening your mind" seems to me to be a really modern idea, not something that Jesus would have done, not a phrase the Gospel writers would have used. So I went back and looked. It's a different Greek word, and they're translated differently into English. In the Emmaus story, as the two disciples and Jesus are walking down the road, Luke says he *interprets* the Scriptures to them. But that doesn't seem to help them recognize who he is.

So just a few hours later, here Jesus is again, he's told them who he is, he's shown them his resurrected body, and he tries again. This time, he opens their minds first, so that this time they'll understand what he's been telling them for his whole ministry, that he is the Messiah that they read about in the Scriptures. And just so we're all clear, it's the Scriptures of what we call the Old Testament—Luke refers to them in kind of a short hand of the law, the prophets, and the psalms. Those represent the three categories of scriptures.

And I'll stop here for a minute and confess that I am really, thoroughly, incredibly jealous of the disciples in both of these stories. The two on the road to Emmaus, and the ones in Jerusalem. I'm a little bit jealous that they got to be with Jesus throughout his ministry AND they got to see Jesus after the resurrection. But I'm really, thoroughly, and incredibly jealous that they got to listen to Jesus explain the Scriptures, all of them. Can you even imagine?

But back to "he opened their minds to understand the Scripture." I've always thought that opening a mind was something a person had to do for themselves. But this is pretty clear that it is Jesus doing the mind-opening of those who were listening. And it seems to be the first step to their understanding.

But even if Jesus is the one doing the mind-opening, I think we need to be ready to have our minds opened, to welcome our minds being opened, to...well, to be open to Jesus opening our minds. And to do all those things is pretty close to opening our minds, I think. It's hard to separate being ready to have our minds opened, and Jesus doing that actual opening.

If I were to name one thing that can prepare us to have Jesus open our minds, I would name curiosity. I'm thinking of the wildly curious nature of a child, or even a puppy. What is this? Is it food? Is it not? They only figure out the answer to that question by putting it in their mouths, right? How does this work? Does this piece move? I think it's easy to be curious about the natural world, because that's something that is interesting to me. It's harder for me to be curious about, say, the stock market, because it's not interesting. But maybe it would be more interesting if I could cultivate some curiosity. When we can wonder about things and ask questions about things and notice things, we're curious, and we're just next door to having our minds opened.

Some people might be afraid to be curious about Scripture, not daring to ask questions or interpret for themselves. Maybe that's what happened with the two disciples on the Emmaus road. Maybe they were so accustomed to just listening to what the experts said about Scripture that they had neglected to be curious about it. And so when Jesus told them something different, they couldn't take it in. It's a lot to absorb, to be fair to them. But if we can welcome Jesus opening our minds and giving us the gift of curiosity, about Scripture in particular, then what new wonders and new ideas and new interpretations might be waiting for us in the pages of the Bible! Scripture is not off limits to human wondering and curiosity and questions and explorations. It won't hurt us at all to have our minds opened, to be curious about the Bible. It certainly won't hurt the Bible. It even more certainly won't hurt God, for us to be curious and wonder. Let us pray and seek for Jesus to open our minds, too.