

New St. James Presbyterian Church
Sunday, April 26, 2020
Rev. Mark McLennan

“OPEN OUR EYES, LORD”

Scripture Readings

Acts 2:14a, 36-41

Psalm 116; 1-4, 12-19

Luke 24:13-35

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The 24th chapter of Luke's gospel begins on the precipice of life and death, that gingerly balanced place called "early dawn," where dark and light spar with each other before light finally emerges victorious.

The 23rd chapter ends in full darkness, with the death of the one they thought would save them, the tomb closed up, the quiet Sabbath surrounding those who dressed his body.

Hope was lost in the death-filled darkness.

Chapter 24 begins with just a glimmer of hope as the morning sun rises over the empty tomb.

The chapter falls neatly into three sections.

It starts with that Easter morning story of the empty tomb and the men in dazzling clothes who send the women away with the news.

The chapter ends out in Bethany, with a blessing from Jesus as he is carried up from earth to heaven.

But here in the middle is the story of these two travelers who set out for Emmaus.

Luke doesn't tell us why they're going, what their agenda is, why they've left Jerusalem.

Maybe they've left in fear, maybe in despair, maybe because they don't know what to do now that everything has changed.

On the road they meet this stranger, and I can't help but wonder if he seems even a little familiar to them, like maybe they've met him somewhere before but can't quite place it as they walk along.

So, the three of them talk as they walk, and the two travelers don't seem to understand what has happened, and the stranger tries to tell them.

But before they know it, they have arrived where they are going.

It is late, so they invite him to come in and eat with them and he accepts, though it turns out that he may have been the one doing the inviting all along.

Surely, when they sit down to eat, it starts to come back to them, where they had met this stranger before.

Surely, they start to remember other meals they've shared together:

- that bread-and-fish picnic when the 5000 were fed
- that last supper in an upstairs room just days before, when they gathered, frightened, when he spoke of things they did not understand and did not want to hear, when he passed the cup and broke the bread.

Surely, it starts to come back to them.

It's the breaking of the bread that does it.

It's when he breaks the bread that they finally remember where they have met this man before.

It's when he breaks the bread, when the flesh of the bread is torn and the crumbs fall to the table -- it's then that their eyes are finally opened and they can see what's really happening.

It's when he breaks the bread that they are brought back from the shadows of death and they realize that life has won.

It seems to me that the church lives here in the middle of this chapter--between the abandoned linens of the empty tomb and the ascension to heaven.

I know we celebrate the birthday of the church on the fiery festival of Pentecost; but I think the church is born here, broken open here with the breaking of the bread.

We weren't there that morning.

We didn't see the rolled-away stone or hear the women tell the story.

And the great mystery of heaven lies far off -- in comprehension, at least, if not in time.

So here we are, in the middle.

That's where the church lives -- gathered around the table, telling old, old stories, sharing the feast.

It's in the scriptures and the table that the story breaks open for us, and we realize again that life has won.

Sometimes, though, if we are honest, that breaking open means not just rejoicing in the triumph of life, but also opening our eyes to the broken places in our world.

Living with eyes opened means recognizing that this place we live in, here in this middle time between the empty tomb and the rise to heaven, is a place that is sometimes as filled with pain and grief as it is with life and love.

So maybe the church becomes the place where those truths are broken open, too.

With eyes open, we can see that there is too much injustice in the world, too much pain.

With eyes open, we can see that there are too many hungry and too many left out in the cold, too many strangers still not welcome at the table.

And maybe the church at its best lives in the midst of those hard truths, challenges the powers that threaten to pull us into darkness, and offers little glimpses of the light.

The Rev. Lee Hull Moses

One Sunday morning at our church, we were gathered in the fellowship hall as we often are, drinking coffee and eating breakfast, catching up on news from the week and thinking about heading upstairs to Sunday school classes.

There was a commotion underneath one of the tables where I was standing, and I bent to look and discovered a red-headed three-year-old playing matchbox cars with one of the highly respected elders of our congregation, who had crawled under the table in his church clothes.

They *vroomed* their cars up and down the floor, oblivious to the rest of us watching, both of them filled with the delight of playing with the other.

Maybe it's a small thing, playing matchbox cars under the table on a Sunday morning; but when I saw them there, I thought:

that's what church should be—a place where, even for a moment or two, life breaks open and joy abounds.

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Lee is right –

When we do it right, that's what church looks like:

- sharing meals around potluck tables,
- crying together at the funeral of a friend,
- lifting prayers in weekly worship,
- telling and re-telling the stories of scripture,
- working for justice,
- serving together for community and world,
- suggesting, sometimes loudly, sometimes gently,
that maybe there might be another way to live.

This week in Nova Scotia – the darkness descended.

- On multiple families, on multiple communities, on a whole province.
- On people I know – not directly affected, but close.
- On ministers I know – who need to be faithful pastors, under almost impossible circumstances, trying to find the light in the darkness.

Still,

That's where the church lives, I think, in this world that is far too broken, offering little glimpses where grace breaks open and we can see that *life* just might win again.

IN THE NAME OF THE CREATOR, LIVING CHRIST, AND HOLY SPIRIT...AMEN

Let us pray:

God of light and life, break open the good news for us. Meet us here, in this broken world, and remind us again of the power of light over darkness, of life over death.

Help us to live with eyes opened to the new life you offer us.

Help us to live with eyes opened to the pain around us, that we might bring your hope to the world.

Grant us peace. Amen.

Luke 24:13-35 - comments

Frederick Buechner - "I believe that although the two disciples did not recognize Jesus on the road to Emmaus, Jesus recognized them, that he saw them as if they were the only two people in the world. And I believe that the reason why the resurrection is more than just an extraordinary event that took place some two thousand years ago and then was over and done with is that, even as I speak these words and you listen to them, he also sees each of us like that."

Alan Brehm, "Our experience of life in this world is such that we always have to keep learning what it means to have faith. That doesn't typically happen well when we try to go it alone. Faith is something that thrives and grows in the context of a community."

OFFERING QUOTE

Consider your possessions loaned to you by God.

-St. Catherine of Siena, (1347-1380), philosopher and theologian

PRAYER OF APPROACH

God of the resurrection, we gather this morning as a community of believers.

We come with joy to greet one another and to tell again and again the amazing news: Christ is risen! Love is victorious over death!

You have given us new life in the name of your Son!

May our singing, praying, listening, and proclaiming be a testimony to the power of your love to make us a new creation as a community of faith.

O Jesus Christ, sometimes we are so busy talking with each other that we fail to find you beside us. We walk on, so focused on our questions that we do not create the silent spaces which would allow you to speak with us and enlighten our journeying.

Stay with us, Jesus Christ. Reach out towards us and invite us to pause and meet with you, we pray.

As we look at our lives and that of the world around us, we are sometimes too anxious to share our real questions or our doubts and fears. We keep them within us in troubled silence.

Stay with us, Jesus Christ. Reach out towards us and invite us to pause and meet with you, we pray.

We call your name, O Christ, and hope to discover you here in our community of vulnerable faith. We pray in the name of the risen Christ. Amen.

Words of Assurance

Whether we believe it, or not, Jesus Christ never leaves us nor forsakes us.

Let us open our hearts to receive the grace which Christ brings to us in faithfulness. We are forgiven! Thanks be to God!

PRAYER OF INTERCESSION

You come to us in unexpected places, in a crowded room,

In a journey on a dusty road, in conversation, In the stillness.

You come in the midst of our doubt, our fear, our sorrow

You come in the power of the resurrection

No pain and suffering is unknown to you.

You bring us peace and we pray for the places where there is no peace

Countries torn by war. Refugees seeking homes. Prisoners facing torture.

Hearts broken by pure violence

You bring peace - peace to the tensions and conflicts within us

To the regrets, the failure, the broken relationships, the lost friendships

You bring peace, for you are a friend to us

When we are alone. When we are lonely

When we are grieving and unbearably sad

Unseen you are there

You bring us peace and we pray that we too may become peacemakers.

PRAYER IN THE FACE OF VIOLENCE – from the PCC web page

God of loving-kindness, you hold all situations and souls in your hands and you are our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in times of trouble.

You sent Christ into the world that we might have life and have it abundantly; he came as the Prince of Peace to a world that is too often violent.

In the face of harrowing events in Nova Scotia we pray for the family, friends, schools, hospitals, care-workers, law enforcement agencies and personnel, communities and congregations that have been experiencing so much shock, loss, grief and pain this week.

We come to you in grief for those whose lives are cut short or are now forever changed; and we come to you in sorrow and anger at the violence in our streets, schools, workplaces and homes.

Give us strength to be a comfort to those in sorrow; give us wisdom to be voices of peace in moments of chaos, tension and fear; and give us courage to be a force for change in our communities.

And in your grace, let us see the day when the circumstances that lead to violence are transformed and the guns and weapons that destroy life are made into instruments of peace and healing.

These things we pray in the name of the Creator, Christ our Risen Lord, and the Holy Spirit... Amen.

The Lord's Prayer – Our Father... Amen.

Prayer of Dedication/Offering

May the gifts we offer be used to open doors closed to strangers, hands shut tight against generous giving, and hearts frozen by fears of the unknown. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Sending

Go forth in the love of God.

We will take this love into unlovely parts of the world even while we stay isolated at home.

Go forth in the grace of Jesus Christ.

We will look for him in the faces of every person we meet, even at a distance, even through social media.

Go forth in the peace of the Spirit.

We will share this hope with the brokenness all around us, that we might offer healing to everyone.