

READING FROM THE NEW TESTAMENT: Luke 24:44-53

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Opening Minds

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Let's go on a trip into your past. Turn back the years. You're five years old ... and it's only three days before Christmas. What do you see? Is the tree decorated? Are there all sorts of presents wrapped in all the colors of the rainbow around it?

Maybe ... if you were like me, you've already been staring at them for days. And you don't know how you're going to make it ... because like I said ... there are still three more days to go.

Do you remember the anticipation you felt? Do you remember the excitement ... the hopefulness? You don't know what is going to be found in those packages ... but you know it is going to be something really special. However ... you still have to wait. You still have to wait until Christmas morning.

In our Gospel reading this morning, the disciples are going to have to wait, too. Huddled together in a room in Jerusalem ... they have not yet seen or experienced the resurrected Jesus ... when suddenly Jesus appears to them ... he actually scares them because at first they think they are seeing a ghost. But he tells them to touch him ... he is real flesh and bone.

He shows them the wounds on his hands and feet. He then eats a piece of fish with them. But even in their joy, as Luke writes, they still disbelieve. That's when Jesus finally puts all the pieces of the puzzle together for them.

Listen now with your heart to the words of our Risen Savior from the 24th chapter of the Gospel of Luke, verses 44-53. I will be reading from the New Revised Standard Version. Out of respect for the Word of the Lord, those who are able, please stand for the reading.

44 Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled."

45 Then (Jesus) opened their minds to understand the scriptures, 46 and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, 47 and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

48 You are witnesses of these things. 49 And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

50 Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them.

51 While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.

52 And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; 53 and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

This is the word of our Lord. **Thanks be to God!** Please be seated.

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

For three years these disciples followed Jesus throughout Galilee ... down to Jerusalem ... and places in between. For three years he poured out his heart to them ... word upon word ... story after story ... parable upon parable.

They had witnessed the miracles he performed ... they had even seen him raise Lazarus from dead. Yet when he would explain to them on multiple occasions that he must suffer, die and rise again from the dead ... he always seemed to lose them.

It just didn't make sense to them. They couldn't make the connection. They knew there was something special about their Rabbi ... but the world he described to them was nothing like anything they had ever known before. And when they actually saw him hanging dead from a cross ... to them it was over. Dead is dead.

Those words about resurrection ... they were just words. It didn't make sense to them. I really don't believe they had a clue what they were supposed to do next ... except to hide until they could slip out of town and go home. But then Jesus appears to them and calms them with the words, "Peace be with you."

He reminds them of everything ... kind of like a Reader's Digest Condensed Version of the Old Testament ... that everything that had been said about him has now taken place. Now suddenly, they're overjoyed, but even so, they STILL don't quite get it.

That's when we read some of the most fascinating words in the entire gospel ... "He opened their minds to understand the scriptures." He opens their minds. It's like Jesus suddenly turns on a light switch within them.

Before they wandered in darkness ... and now they are standing in the light of the truth. Before they couldn't put it together ... and then suddenly ... they finally understand what Jesus had been talking about all this time. Jesus opens their minds.

And I've got to tell you something about that ... that makes me feel a whole lot better about my own faith ... and the struggles and doubts I've had as a disciple of Jesus Christ. Because there are still times when I just don't get it ... times when I wonder what it's all about.

You see ... as hard as those disciples try to understand everything about Jesus Christ ... they are never going to get it. And the fact is, they aren't anymore capable than you or I are capable of figuring out Jesus Christ. Oh yes, we'd like to put God in a box and know where to find our Savior when we need him ... but it just doesn't work that way.

We just aren't able ... in the limited knowledge of our minds ... to grasp the fullness and the wonder of the divinity of Jesus Christ. But in those special moments ... when Christ opens our minds ... when we allow the goodness and mercy of Christ to fill us ... only then are we able to glimpse and see who our Savior is ... and to taste the goodness of God's mercy and love and grace.

It usually happens when you least expect it ... Jesus just suddenly shows up. And somehow he lets you know that he is there ... "Peace be with you," he tells you. You feel his warmth in your heart ... and in that moment you experience his presence in the eyes of the person you love ... or in the gentle calling of a mountain stream ... or in the compassion of a friend ... in the laughter around a table ... in the quietness of a sunset ... in an epiphany while reading the scriptures ... in a hymn that touches your heart ... you experience the living Christ even in the tears of the grieving ... or in the whispers of the dying ... those are holy moments and times when Christ comes into our lives and opens our minds to the truth he shares with us ... the truth that he loves us ... and we know he is there with us. And our faith is renewed.

But you know ... it's just not always that easy, is it? I sometimes wonder why my faith can't always be like that? Why isn't my faith always rock solid and secure? Why do I sometimes doubt God ... why does my faith waver? I suspect one primary reason my faith sometimes falters is that we live in a world that is counter to our faith.

Living a life as a disciple of Christ truly means living in a culture that challenges your faith at every turn. We live in a world that is always asking us ... Why do you need God ... if you need something, just Google it ... or take a pill ... or read a book ... can't you just figure out your life for yourself?

We live in a world that looks out for Number One ... me first! We live in a world where the rich oppress the poor, where those with power take what they want ... where might makes right.

We live in a world that has gone mad in demanding more and more and more stuff. And friends ... the temptations of this world are a constant pull on our lives as Christians ... whether we are aware of it or not ... and it chips away at our faith. And frankly, not a whole lot has changed.

The world that Jesus' disciples lived in was really no different than the world we now live in ... but the gospel stands counter to the ways of the world ... as Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians: *We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise in Christ.*

But there are those other times in our lives when our faith is so shaken to its very core ... when something happens in our lives and we suddenly come face to face with our doubts about God ... those times when we wonder if Jesus Christ even knows we are alive and what we are living through.

The disciples felt that kind of pain there in Jerusalem ... they were alone ... and frightened. Nothing made sense to them ... and I can guarantee you that they weren't so sure about their faith at that moment.

Many of you have experienced those kinds of times in your own life. Have you ever suffered depression or know someone who has? Depression grabs hold of your mind and there doesn't seem to be anyone ... let alone God ... who understands the pain that you must wrestle with day in and day out.

Some of you know the deep pain and grief that comes from losing a loved one or even a child. There is nothing more horrible in the whole world. Some of you are caught up in the confusion and anxiety and pain that comes when a relationship is breaking or is broken.

Some of you have not spoken to a loved one in years ... and you wonder why your heart is so hardened. Some of you were abused ... maybe sexually or emotionally as a child ... and the idea of a loving Father in heaven is hard to accept.

The fact is ... we live in an imperfect world ... and it's just hard for some of us to believe that God wants to bring healing and wholeness into our lives ... when that seems so far away. And our doubts are there ... and they are real ... and we just don't know what to do about it. And we wonder ... when is God going to open our minds?

All I can tell you is that Jesus Christ came into this world ... this broken world ... to bring healing ... to bring wholeness ... and to save us.

He didn't do it by sitting up on a mountain and answering the questions of those people who climbed up to him ... he didn't use a bullhorn and scream down to us from heaven with rules to live by. No ... he became like us ... human ... he lived through the same problems and issues and pain and suffering that we live through ... he was tempted by this world as we are ... he was criticized and lied about because he spoke words of justice and compassion and love and hope ... and he was persecuted, beaten and nailed to a cross and then wondered if he, too, had been abandoned by God.

But he defeated death and sin when he rose again ... ushering in the Kingdom of God which is all around you. No ... it's not complete yet ... there is much healing needed in this world. But it's happening ... and I believe with all my heart ... it is happening for you, too.

Because I believe that it is through out doubts, that we once again find our faith in Jesus Christ. Sometimes we have to wait a long time ... and we can't do it by ourselves ... because whether we know it or not ... it is God who is there with us through our suffering ... finding the right moment to open our minds to his truth and love and grace.

Now I don't want you to walk out of here and think that the disciples had no more doubts about their faith ... that they were some kind of disciple supermen ... that they were never scared again ... that they were just fired up evangelists who never looked back and marched on to victory. No ... it was nothing like that all. They still faced many trials and tribulations.

That's why Jesus also told them that God would send the Holy Spirit ... to lead them ... to guide them ... to care for them in their journey of faith. Because they, too, would still encounter those times when they doubted ... when their faith felt empty.

And God does the same for us as well ... the Holy Spirit ... is with us. As Paul tells us in the fifth chapter of Romans ... Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. (Romans 5:1-5)

So on this ... the last Sunday of our Easter season ... I pray that the expectant hope, grace and love of Jesus Christ will surround you and fill your life in a very powerful way. I pray that your faith may be strengthened and renewed by the power of the Holy Spirit. And I pray that you will live your life just as expectant and hopeful as a 5-year-old kid on Christmas morning ... for God loves you and is reaching out for you right now.

Let us pray:

You call from tomorrow, You break ancient schemes,
From the bondage of sorrow, the captives dream dreams;
Our women see visions, Our men clear their eyes,
With bold new decisions, Your people arise.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**