

THE HEART OF THE MATTER - "OPEN THE EYES OF MY HEART" Eastertide

Ephesians 1:17-18a
Luke 24:31-36, 45, 48, 50-53

A Sermon Preached by Pastor Amy Roon
University Congregational United Church of Christ
Seattle, Washington 98125
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Scripture:

Ephesians 1:17-18a¹

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of God so that with the eyes of your heart enlightened you may know what is the hope to which you have been called.

Luke 24:31-36, 45, 48, 50-53

Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road while he was opening the scriptures to us?" That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, "The Lord is risen indeed and he has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road and how he then made known to them in the breaking of the bread. While they were talking about this Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." ... Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said, ... "You are witnesses of these things." ... And then Jesus led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and they returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Pastor Amy Roon

Prayer:

God be in our heads,
Be in our hearts,
Be in our understanding,
Be in the words spoken and the words heard.
– Amen

I'm just going to hazard a guess – because I've had enough conversations with folks in this church and other progressives and liberal churches and congregations, folks who are firmly embracing scientific texts in this hand and Christian traditions in the Bible in this hand – that we find ourselves sometimes a little tongue-tied around the Easter story. It just, it's hard to reconcile. We have... If you grew up with just these are the stories this is the way it is: Jesus came. Jesus died. Jesus rose from the dead. And ... You just take that for granted until someone who is not Christian or is having some deep questioning of their own, asks you the questions that really every Christian is going to encounter at

¹ The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). 1989.

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some point. If Jesus was God or the son of God, why did he die? What did this dying mean? And, if Jesus defeated death and resurrection, where is he now? Why isn't he still here? And you'd be surprised how few people are convinced by just the story, these days, of saying: Yes. Well then. You know he, he visited with the disciples and they asked that question, they had that and then he ascended into heaven on a cloud. So now Jesus is with God in heaven. ... And they are not really taken by that answer.

I mean, it is simple if you've grown up with that tradition and you're not asking that question of yourself, but from someone who's not of this tradition you are going to find yourself with some continuing questions about that.

So we have ways of answering that in doctrine or in story and, certainly, in the Bible story arc that we have been listening to in this Eastertide season, we have Jesus dying and being buried and put in a tomb. And we have actually *repeated* narratives of disciples and apostles witnessing Jesus and finding themselves absolutely convinced in facing their doubt, "Could this really be true?" "Who is this??" Grappling with it and then being so convinced that they truly saw Jesus, that they went and risked sounding just as *nutty* as every single one of you may feel when you say it, and go to tell other disciples and say, "Holy smokes! I just met Jesus! For real!" And every single conversation then follows, "Nuh'uh!" "Show me." "Show *me*." "Tell me more if you are going to ..." "I don't get it." And then Jesus comes again and then "rinse and repeat" right? And whether ... Then they almost always some point when they are encountering Jesus, they eat something, or they're in the midst of conversation where they hear Jesus say their name and they are, "Aha! It's really Jesus."

I find it helpful, albeit challenging but helpful, to remember that our Bibles are not books of history or journalism in our modern sense. At all. Looking around good progressive churches that we are, in my Scriptures printed here, thank you. – [In deeper voice] "Good thing she was raised Baptist." – I was raised Lutheran so all of my prayers are written out ahead of time. And I know where the Bible is on my shelf.

So! Your New Testament, as folks many, many years later looking at these different books said, well surely we've got to hear about Jesus's life first and the story of Jesus's life in the Gospels – in the Good News. And then we read letters – supposedly all from Paul, but, you know, letters from the community – that are talking about who Jesus is how we live as a Christian community. But it's important to remember that chronologically that's not how it works. It's not how Christianity actually evolved.

Some of you know this but ... So Jesus is roughly 33 when he dies so it's roughly 40 CE (Common Era) when that event takes place. And what we have a first record of are the letters of Paul. And the letters of Paul going around to different communities talking about this amazing Lifeforce he is absolutely convinced that you knowing about and us talking about and living into is going to change your life to a whole new way. And, honestly, that goes on for several years and, I'm sure, in the midst of being in all of those conversations, somebody at some point says okay, "Well I need you to tell me more about who this Jesus person is." So these communities begin to tell the story of Jesus's life and they tell the story – and this is a common form in the ancient world of *historical biography*. And the point is not to tell history as truth the way we understand it, that this cup is most definitely blue and most folks who are not color blind will agree that this cup is blue and white. And, if I'm gonna tell a

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story about it and someone is going to actually want to be able to go back and find that particular artifact and PROVE that we had a blue and white cup here in the sanctuary.

In ancient Christianity of course, since most people couldn't read, there are no pictures, there is no documentation the way we prove things today anyway. IF the most *meaningful* color for a cup was *gold*, then the most *meaningful* way I can tell you the story of what cup we had in the sanctuary is to say that this cup is *gold*. Follow? I want people to understand the *meaning* of this cup *more* than whether or not the way *we* think of fact. That is how the stories of the Gospels evolve. So, as our good friends Dominic Crosson and Marcus Borg would have told us, "Everything in the Bible is true, and some of it actually happened." I have no way of knowing exactly which pieces are which, but a community told that story in that particular way and with those details because they felt *that passionately* in their hearts the truth of that story.

That happens for roughly the whole another 30 to 40 years, before anyone starts writing that down. If you think about that, you have the actual life of Jesus then you have folks talking about Jesus for roughly the same amount of time that Jesus was alive. And then writing down these stories as a sense of who Jesus was. So the way that you might think the progression of persons actually encountering this information and trying to discern for themselves what is true, in the years and months immediately following Jesus's death, his followers were determined to continue his message in Jerusalem and beyond. That much we know because otherwise we wouldn't be talking about this at all.

Keep in mind that their leader was publicly tortured, executed with little historical evidence of any particular pomp and circumstance to actually suggest he is nearly as important as they knew him to be. This movement was expected to die a similarly unremarkable death. So I don't know what happened but I am absolutely convinced that *something* happened because I don't know – not only too many individuals that encounter that kind of pain and fear and witness of public humiliation *and* keep talking as if somebody that has just been executed is alive *and* are able to convince growing numbers of people that this is a great thing to talk about, that this story is life-giving. So something happened that convinced his followers that the movement was not only not over, but that there was more work to do. And they wanted to do it. They were so convinced of this they were able to convince others who had witnessed Jesus *neither* in life *nor* in death, that he was not only important but gathering in his name was Life. And Paul, who did not know Jesus, became convinced that not only following Jesus was the way of life but it was the way of life for anyone who wanted to join them – *anyone*, regardless of what background or tradition they came from.

So we hear from Paul in those first years after Jesus had already died, "I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of God so that *with* the eyes of your *heart* enlightened, you may know what is the *hope* to which you have been called."² So here is Paul, not telling you all about the details of Jesus's life, but speaking directly to someone who's going, "What do you want from me?" And he's saying, "I want you to feel the passion and hope that I feel for life and to trust that that hope and that passion have been given to you by God."

He convinced enough folks to feel that passion that they wanted to answer those questions. Who is Jesus? And the answer in the different Gospels: * a prophet; * a descendent of kings; * a carpenter's

² Op cit, Ephesians 1:17-18a.

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son; * the son of a virgin mother. So keep in mind that if Jesus was God and the son of God, why did he die? What did Jesus's is dying mean? And why isn't he still here?

The idea that the son of God – or the son of a god – would come down to earth and live among us humans is not unique to Christianity, especially in the Greco-Roman world, right? And the idea that he is born somewhat human or part of him has some level of human frailty, this isn't new either. I mean there's Achilles and there's – I mean – there's lots of different gods at this time that people would imagine. But what they came down to earth for was to *party*. They came to party and the fact that they could be gods on earth was to enjoy the fact that that meant they could be the most powerful person around. If they only hung out with gods they might lose their arm wrestling match, but if they came down to earth and get to be super-powerful. And for the most part when they ate and drank, it was hardly an agapé meal. When they ate and drank with humans or they joined in human causes, it was for war. These gods were known for their fighting. So to be celebrating that our God apparently isn't interested in being glorified as a warrior . . . Here's a story of a god who wasn't interested in coming to earth to show off how powerful he was and, while this God was interested in sharing a meal with us and wasn't above providing some wine at the occasional wedding party, this God was more interested in healing people, in feeding others, and being present with the poor and the vulnerable. *This* was a strange God and an even stranger reason for God to come to earth.

These first Christians lived in a world just as consumed with winning and power and war as ours is. These first Christians also lived in a world of incredible inequity of wealth and privilege. And theirs was a world of even more limited social mobility although we're coming back around to some pretty static levels of social mobility. So to embrace a God who prizes compassion and caring and sharing and healthcare for all, *this* was a countercultural act to do and would require a community to live it out in practice. And so they would gather. And they would tell the story of Jesus's life, of peace, of caring. They would tell the parables he told and argue and wonder about what on earth he meant. And they sang songs and they broke bread and felt, oh, wasn't there just something that happens, some way our hearts just break open, some kind of way we can feel when we show up and realize we're truly welcome just the way we are, that you don't have to be the best. You could even be an evil loser and be loved.

In those early days and years after Jesus's death the question of how the community would continue, the evidence that it should, the numbers of people who would show up as Thomas did and say, "Show me," must have happened over and over and over again. We're still saying it now. And the apostles' answer is right here in the gospel narrative and we've witnessed it this spring. We witness it every time we gather, not just here in the sanctuary but anytime we gather as church, and I love to remind you all, anytime we start getting into running an agenda just the way you might at every ... at a school board meeting or at your work or the ... we get to the different here! We get to be different.

Haven't the eyes of our hearts been opened the times that we have broken bread and shared it with one another. Haven't the eyes of our hearts been opened at the Fellowship breakfast when you get to see kids that are not your own or, even better, if you see your own kid acting generously to someone else. We've witnessed babies welcomed in this church, the holy chaos of new life. We've supported and witnessed our youth naming for themselves what it means to follow Jesus. We have found or are beginning to find our collective voice as a congregation to name ourselves as

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"sanctuary". We gather to celebrate lives well lived and sit with those grieving and in pain. And the eyes of our hearts are opened; and who do we see but Jesus, all around us.

I often am so glad to welcome liturgists and folks to be in worship leadership with us, because we get the best seat in the house. So I'm going to invite you for a moment – I get to see all of you – to take a look around.

Wave! Yes! Go ahead! Who do you see?

And as we get to know each other, some here for the first time, some here blessedly have been coming here every week for over 50 years. Vevette [Cooperstein], someday – I don't know how long – you're going to be 103 in July. To have Vevette and our babies in the same sanctuary, to *know* that the whole scope of human experience . . . I look around and I see not only many faces of this congregation but your stories. It is such a privilege to carry with you the prayers of your hearts. And it creates in me the deep Aha! of connection and compassion. 'Then their eyes were opened and they recognized Him and He vanished from their sight and they said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road while he was opening up the Scriptures to us?"'³ In these last chapters of Luke over and over again Jesus appears to say, "Peace be with you." And all those reports of seeing him describe it as a revelatory moment, a deep Aha! of hope and peace and passion for life. And it instills in them a deep desire to share this feeling, to inspire generosity, to encourage one another, to nurture one another, to the sharing of a meal and a prayer. And each time they do this they wonder about it and they need reassurance that the power of what they just experienced was real!

And the story tells us that then Jesus leaves the earth completely – frankly with little explanation as to why – blessing them and then gone. Because all we really know is that His body is no longer here. So we've got to put it in the story that his body's gone. But what generation after generation of Christian communities have taught us is that Jesus is not gone, that Jesus is present in the breaking of bread and the sharing of resources, in the healing of the sick in body, mind, or spirit, and when we gather and tell our stories of how and when the eyes of our hearts were opened, our revelatory moments of hope and passion for justice, we see Jesus alive in our midst inspiring us towards generosity, radical hospitality, acts of love and justice. Your love for God for yourself and one another, with all your heart and mind and soul and strength: this is the proof that Jesus still lifts.
– Amen

UCUCC: AR

Transcribed by Beth Bartholomew from www.universityucc.org/Sermons/2017/7/26/2017

³ Op cit, Luke 24:32.