

SERMON SERIES: "Opening the Way"
SERMON TITLE: "Open Hearts"
SERMON TEXT: Luke 24:13-35
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: April 8, 2018, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

An old television commercial showed two men sitting on a bench outside a store. The men were eagerly talking about the great sale that was soon to take place inside, and how they could hardly wait until the store opened up. But then they observed a woman walk up to the door and go right in. "How'd she do that?" they wondered. Then they looked up and saw a sign over their heads that said, "Open 24 hours." All that time they were outside waiting, they could have been inside taking advantage of the sale, because the store was always open.

Last Sunday, I started a sermon series I'm calling "Opening the Way." The first sermon in the series was about "God's Grand Opening" of the tomb on Easter morning, showing the women that God had raised Jesus from the dead, promoting faith in those early disciples, and opening up the way of faith to all kinds of people across the centuries ever since. This morning, I'm continuing this "Opening the Way" series. As we reflect on our scripture reading from Luke 24, let's consider what it means to have "open hearts."

1—OPEN HEARTS AS A DESCRIPTION OF OUR EXPERIENCE

We begin with "open hearts" as a description of our experience as Christian believers. About 20 years ago, the United Methodist denomination came up with the slogan, "Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors: The People of the United Methodist Church." Ever since then, we've been using that slogan to describe who we are and what we're about. The slogan is catchy, and helps draw people into our United Methodist churches. But "open hearts" isn't something new to this millennium. "Open

hearts” is a descriptor that can apply to anyone who has ever had faith in Jesus Christ, for it goes back all the way to that first Easter Sunday.

Luke 24 tells us that there were two men walking along the road to Emmaus, reviewing all that had happened over the past few days. On Thursday night, the disciples had eaten their last supper with Jesus. Then they’d gone with Jesus to the garden to pray. Jesus was arrested, and the officials crucified him on Friday. Then just that morning, the women had gone to the tomb and found it wide open. An angelic message informed the women that Jesus had risen. The women passed along that message to the male disciples, but, at first, the guys couldn’t believe what the women said.

Later that same Easter day, while the two men were walking home to Emmaus, Jesus caught up with them on the road. After listening a bit, Jesus joined in the conversation, and called them “slow of heart,” for not believing what the prophets had spoken. Even though these men had been followers of Jesus, and probably meant well, they were still lacking in knowledge and understanding. Fortunately, after Jesus gave them some instruction from the scriptures, and they invited him to stay with them, their eyes were opened. The two men finally recognized that the one breaking bread with them was Jesus. That’s when they realized that their *slow* hearts had also been *burning* hearts. Slowly warming up, they finally believed that Jesus had in fact risen from the dead.

I like this image of burning hearts, not because it makes me think of spicy food or acid reflux, but because it reminds me of John Wesley’s heart-warming experience. Like the followers of Jesus who were so discouraged and sad after Jesus’ crucifixion, John Wesley was at a depressingly low point in his life. The year was 1738. Wesley had just returned home to England from Georgia, where he had served as a pastor to the English colonists and as a missionary to the Native Americans. Wesley’s ministerial experience had not gone well, and he was doubting his own salvation. Fortunately, Wesley had a friend named Peter Boehler who invited him to a Bible study. On the evening of May 24, 1738, Wesley went to that Bible study at a house on Aldersgate Street. There, while someone was reading Martin Luther’s

preface to the Book of Romans, John Wesley had a profound religious experience. He went home that night and wrote in his journal, “While [Luther] was describing the change that God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.”

Following in the tradition of John Wesley, we United Methodists have had our own heart-warming religious experiences. We have felt God’s love and the assurance of divine forgiveness. We have known the salvation that comes to us when God opens up our hearts, fixes anything that’s wrong in there, and changes our lives. Sometimes that spiritual heart surgery happens quickly and fairly easily. But sometimes our cardiac situation is dire, and our divine physician has to work harder to repair the damage done by years of inherited tendencies, sinful attitudes, and stubborn practices. Sometimes our spiritual arteries have been clogged, and our hearts have been squeezed tightly in a knot. We have felt a pain in our chest, or a heaviness or weakness in our muscles, like a spiritual heart attack. But our divine physician has known how to care for us with the medicine of mercy and the means of grace. Like those disciples on the Road to Emmaus, we can be described as people who have been influenced and impacted at the core of our being. “Open hearts” is a description of our experience.

2—OPEN HEARTS AS A PRESENT ACTION

“Open hearts” is a great description of our Christian experience. But “open hearts” should be more than just an adjective that describes us based on what happened to us in the past. The expression “open hearts” is also active in the present time because the word “open” is also a verb. In addition to what God has done for us, there is also a role for us to play.

Think about the two men in the Emmaus story. The only way they were able to receive an opening of their eyes and their hearts was through their own willing participation. When Jesus came alongside them on the road, they included him in their conversation. When they got to Emmaus and

Jesus was going to continue on, they “urged him strongly” to stay with them for dinner and overnight. When Jesus called them “foolish” and “slow of heart,” they didn’t get offended and reject him; they listened to his teaching all the more eagerly. And then, after their eyes and hearts were opened, and they recognized Jesus in the breaking of the bread, the two men quickly returned to Jerusalem to share their experience with the other disciples. They didn’t keep this experience quietly to themselves. They didn’t spend a lot of time wondering or doubting what had happened. They didn’t even wait until morning. Verse 33 says that they hurried back to Jerusalem “that same hour.” The news that Jesus was alive again was too good to keep to themselves. God had opened their hearts, and now they had to act quickly to help open the hearts of others.

It makes sense, doesn’t it, that, if you had a powerful and wonderful religious experience, you’d want to tell someone about it? I think we underestimate the importance of sharing our story with other people. We forget that there really are others who would like to learn about our experience, because they too would like to know the power of God’s salvation, the assurance of Christ’s forgiving mercy, and the life-changing transformation of divine love. If we hold back that kind of information, then how can we say our own hearts are open? If our own hearts are open, then we’ll be interested in other people and eager to share our experience with them, so we can help open their hearts of experience too.

At one of the churches I served in Colorado, there was a member named Ted. Ted served on the church’s evangelism committee. Ted’s strong faith in God had come to him through what he believed was an act of divine intervention in his life. A few years before, Ted had had a massive heart attack and nearly died. But, with the help of open heart surgery, God had restored Ted to life and set him on a new path with different priorities. Consequently, Ted was eager to tell others about his experience. Ted didn’t want them to have to go through a heart attack or quintuple-bypass surgery like he did, but— even more—he wanted other people to find the joy of forgiveness and God’s transformation of their life. Ted wanted to share his experience, so God could open people’s hearts.

CONCLUSION

In *The Faith We Sing* hymnal, there's a little song that has two verses. The first one says, "Into my heart, into my heart, come into my heart, Lord Jesus." The second verse says, "Out of my heart, out of my heart, shine out of my heart, Lord Jesus."* The sentiment of that song goes well with what I'm trying to explain to you this morning.

"Open hearts" is a description of the experience we Christians have had. God has opened up our hearts, cleaned them out, healed them, and filled them with faith. Our Lord Jesus has opened our hearts and come in. But "open hearts" is more than a description of something that happened to us in the past. "Open hearts" is also an action that we participate in, so that Jesus can also shine out. Just like the two men in Emmaus hurried back to Jerusalem to share their experience with the other disciples, let's open up our hearts to other people, so that God can open their hearts too.

*First verse and music written by Harry D. Clarke, 1924; second verse is anonymous (Cokesbury: Nashville, 2000), #2160.