

SERMON SERIES: "Opening the Way"  
SERMON TITLE: #3: "Open Minds"  
SERMON TEXT: Luke 24:36-48  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: April 15, 2018, at First UMC

### **INTRODUCTION**

Most of you are probably aware that April 4<sup>th</sup> was the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. What you may not have been thinking about, though, is that this month is also the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the formation of the United Methodist Church. On April 23, 1968, the Evangelical United Brethren merged with the Methodists to create the United Methodist Church. That union of two denominations came at a time when our American society was conflicted and divided by the Civil Rights Movement, the women's rights movement, turmoil over Vietnam, and the counter-culture revolution. Generational conflict was rampant.

And, yet, in the midst of all that, the United Methodist Church was born. With the creation of this newly-merged denomination, there was opportunity to improve some situations of injustice. For example, the right of women to serve as ordained clergy was affirmed. And the separate and unequal Central Jurisdiction was eliminated, so that African Americans could be fully integrated in the governance of the church.

Those changes didn't happen easily. No doubt there was turmoil in the leadership and membership of the denomination. At the uniting conference, one of the sermons was titled "The Unfinished Business of an Unfinished Church." The people of John Wesley had gone through a lot of change to get to that point, and the 1968 merger was opening the way for what would lie ahead.

For the past couple weeks, we've been talking about opening the way of faith. On Easter Sunday, we remembered God's grand opening of the tomb, which allowed the women to see that Jesus had risen from the dead. Last Sunday, we recalled the two disciples who encountered the risen Jesus on

the Road to Emmaus. As he spoke with them and broke the bread, their hearts were opened to believe, and they encouraged others to open their hearts as well.

Today we've read another resurrection story. Luke 24:45 tells us that, as Jesus appeared to the disciples gathered in Jerusalem, "he opened their minds so they could understand the scriptures." Let's think about this concept. What would it mean for us to have open minds of understanding?

### **1—OPEN MINDS BEGIN WITH A FOUNDATION**

Maybe the first thing we need to recognize is that open minds of understanding always begin with some kind of foundation of knowledge or belief. "Open minds" doesn't mean a free-for-all. Open minds always start with at least a rough draft from which to work.

We see this in the gospel story. The disciples had gone through a huge ordeal in the past couple weeks with the excitement of Palm Sunday; the conflict over the cleansing of the temple; the ritual of the Passover-Last Supper meal; Jesus' agonizing prayer in the garden; and the arrest, trial, and crucifixion of their leader. The disciples hadn't even had time to process all that when the women reported the empty tomb and various ones began testifying that they had seen the risen Lord. Now, with Jesus' sudden appearance there among them in Jerusalem, it's no wonder the disciples were startled and frightened, thinking they were seeing a ghost.

So Jesus calmed their nerves by taking them back to their foundation. When Jesus saw that the disciples had doubts in their minds, he reassured them with things that were natural and safe. He showed them his hands and his feet, his flesh and his bones. He asked his disciples for something to eat, and those former fishermen gave him the comfort food with which they were most familiar. Then Jesus talked to them about the Law of Moses and the Prophets—stories and scriptures that had been the basic texts of the Jewish people for centuries.

The fact that open minds require a foundation of knowledge or belief is true for us today too. With constant upgrades in technology and rapid changes in society, I think our heads would spin right

off our bodies if we tried to keep up with everything and follow every new trend. If we allowed ourselves to be blown by every wind, we'd become lost. We'd become mental, emotional, and spiritual basket cases. That's why, as Christians, we sing songs like "The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord" and "We have an anchor that keeps the soul steadfast and sure while the billows roll." Our open minds must have a strong base. Our open minds begin with a solid foundation.

## **2—OPEN MINDS ACCEPT NEW IDEAS AND INFORMATION**

There's another requirement of open minds, however. We must also be willing and able to accept new ideas and information. The resurrection of Jesus was a new kind of event. It's no wonder that it took the disciples by surprise and even scared them. But, in order to believe that Jesus had risen from the dead, the disciples had to be willing to incorporate some new thoughts. They had to be willing to take in new data from their eyes, fingers, and ears, as they looked, touched, and listened. They had to be willing to consider ideas that had previously seemed impossible and unthinkable.

Consider this. What if ancient humans never experimented with rubbing sticks or striking stones together to make fire? What if Benjamin Franklin never opened his mind to ideas about electricity? What if Thomas Edison never thought about putting that electricity to use in a light bulb? What if Alexander Graham Bell never expanded his thinking to invent the telephone? I guess human life would still be possible, but I'm not sure any of us would like it very much.

The same is true for our spiritual life. If we think we already know all there is to know about God and the Bible, then we probably won't gain much new ground. If we think we have the problems of the world and the members of our community all figured out, then we probably won't increase our faith very much. But if we're willing to take in some new ideas and information through a Bible study, a small group discussion, or a mission trip experience, then maybe there's some hope for improvement. If we're willing to allow God's voice to speak to us during prayer or through a devotional book or sermon, then just possibly we might find ourselves inching forward in spiritual growth.

As I was reading Bible commentaries on this passage from Luke 24, I was reminded of something that I had forgotten. In verse 44, Jesus refers to the Law of Moses, the Prophets, *and the Psalms*. Apparently this one verse in Luke is the only place in the New Testament in which the Psalms are named alongside the Law and the Prophets. This is significant because the Law and the Prophets had long been the primary sources of authority for the Jewish people. The Psalms had been of lesser significance, maybe the way we consider our hymnal compared to the Bible today. But Jesus apparently elevated the Psalms in importance, giving them a new, higher level of authority. So great was this shift, in fact, that the followers of Jesus who wrote the New Testament quoted the Psalms more often than any other book of the Old Testament.

Do you hear what I'm saying? Jesus was building on the foundation of familiar Jewish scriptures found in the Law and Prophets. But he also elevated a new authority, a new way of thinking. He brought new ideas to his disciples. He opened their minds to new understandings about God's love, God's kingdom, and the role of God's people. These new ideas from the Psalms became a huge help to the disciples in interpreting who Jesus was and what happened to him on the cross, in the resurrection, and in his later exaltation to God. If it weren't for Jesus' increased emphasis on the Psalms and the disciples' willingness to accept this new authority, the resurrection story and saving power of Jesus might have been lost to us.

Open minds require strong foundations, but they can't be stuck in concrete. Open minds of understanding must be willing to accept new ideas and information.

### **CONCLUSION**

On Friday, a new book was delivered to my house. I had ordered the book because it was written by the son of our church members Dee and David Coyle. The Coyles used to live in Michigan, where their son John grew up ice skating. John won many competitions and became a member of the U.S. Olympic speed skating relay team that won a silver medal in Lillehammer in 1994.

I haven't had time to read the whole book yet. But, in the opening pages, John tells about an experience he had at Stanford University, where he was pursuing a degree in Mechanical Engineering. One day he was sitting in his Linear Algebra class when the professor was returning graded tests. Despite the fact that he had put in a lot of effort, John failed the exam miserably. That's when he came to the realization that he could no longer pursue a major that focused so heavily on math. That's when he knew it wasn't about trying harder, working harder, or getting smarter. It was about finding a different major for which he had more natural talent. Once John had that aha moment, a new set of possibilities opened up for him, for which he was much better suited.

John's success today is in the field of Design Thinking. Like other kinds of engineering, Design Thinking tries to solve problems. But, if I'm understanding his thesis correctly, instead of getting stuck in a cycle of trying and failing to fix persistent weaknesses, Design Thinking opens up possibilities for success through focusing on strengths. It's a new way of looking at problems. It's a new way of opening up the mind.\*

Maybe that's what Jesus did with his disciples. After Jesus' crucifixion, it would have been easy for the disciples to get stuck in their failure and guilt. Judas betrayed him, Peter denied him, and they all ran away in fear. If that were their final experience of Jesus, they might never have recovered. And that would have been the end of the Christian movement.

But God did something wonderful. God raised Jesus from the dead so Jesus could return to them and open their minds to the strong foundation of the Law and the Prophets, the newer authority of the Psalms, and their own new experience of seeing the risen Christ. Yes, they had failed Jesus earlier. But they didn't have to get stuck there. Now it was time to receive power from the Holy Spirit to go out and proclaim repentance and forgiveness to the nations. It was time for the disciples to begin sharing this faith of open minds.

\*John K. Coyle, *Design for Strengths: Applying Design Thinking to Individual and Team Strengths* (John K. Coyle & The Art of Really Living LLC, USA: 2018).