

SERMON TITLE: "Open Our Eyes" (50 Days for the Earth Series)
SERMON TEXT: Luke 24:13-35
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: May 3, 2020, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

The 50-day season between Easter and Pentecost coincides nicely with this year's 50-year anniversary of Earth Day. In honor of that alignment, I'm using the Easter-season scriptures to talk not only about Jesus' resurrection and ours, but also about the revitalization of the earth. Two Sundays ago, we noted that Doubting Thomas was better able to believe in Jesus' resurrection when he got his hands dirty by touching Jesus' wounds, just like we might be able to believe more in the life-regenerating value of the earth if we get our hands dirty planting seeds in the garden. Last Sunday, using Psalm 23, we talked about how God wants to shepherd us not just in heaven after we die, but first in the green valleys and beside the still waters of this planet.

Today's scripture takes us back to the gospels for another post-resurrection story. According to Luke 24, it was later on Easter day when two of Jesus' followers were walking from Jerusalem toward the village of Emmaus. As they made their way, the resurrected Jesus himself came near and walked with them. But, like a strange comedy, they didn't recognize who he was. We readers know right away and can hardly wait for the punch-line revelation to occur. But, for the disciples in the story, it took quite a process before their eyes were opened to recognize Jesus and see what was happening.

Of course, the stories in the Bible are never told just so we will know what happened to *those people* a long time ago. So let's dig into this Emmaus story and think about what it might take for God to open *our* eyes.

1—TAKE FAITH JOURNEY TOGETHER

Probably the best beginning place is verse 13, where it says, "Now on that same day two of them were going . . . and talking and discussing." What we see here is that two were taking a faith journey

together. As Jesus said in another context, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” And sure enough, Jesus came to them and joined them, walking along and talking with them. Each one of us always has a responsibility and need to connect with God on our own as individuals. Each one of us certainly should have our own personal relationship with Jesus as our Lord and Savior. But the quickest way to run out of faith is to try to go it alone. The very best way to initiate, keep, and increase our faith is to share it with other people, discussing and asking questions together.

I know, sometimes we’re afraid to have faith conversations with other people for fear that our lack of knowledge or spiritual practices might show through. But these two followers of Jesus obviously didn’t know all the answers yet. When Jesus came and walked right beside them, they didn’t even recognize him! But because they spent time together, talking about the events of Easter morning, they eventually were able to see the light. Jesus was able to get through to them and open their eyes.

This value of journeying together in Christian faith is also true for other aspects of life. How much more helpful it is to have a companion walking along with us. In this time of social distancing, we may have to use Zoom meetings, phone calls, or talk from six feet apart. But that’s OK. Any kind of being together gives God more of a chance to open our eyes.

2—TALK ABOUT FACTS AND WISDOM

Of course, the two who were walking to Emmaus didn’t have their eyes opened just by being together. Their eyes were opened in large part because of the content of their discussion. Their conversation was intentionally about Jesus’ powerful ministry and his arrest, trial, and crucifixion that had occurred in recent days. They also spoke of the empty tomb discovered by the women and the angels’ message that Jesus was alive. Then Jesus carefully explained to them what the scriptures had laid out—that the Messiah would suffer before entering into glory. In other words, the Emmaus walkers talked about the recent facts of what had happened. When they were done relaying the data, then Jesus put it in perspective from the wisdom that the prophets had declared long ago.

Relaying the facts and gaining wisdom from the experts sounds a lot like what we've all been doing over the past couple months with the coronavirus. We've been talking by phone, Skype, Zoom, Facebook, and over the fence with our neighbors. We've been listening to TV and radio reports and political press conferences. And we've been carefully paying attention to medical professionals who can interpret the situation for us from their decades of work with infectious diseases.

Personally, I've found the articles about the flu epidemic of 1918 interesting and helpful. Cities like Philadelphia that allowed large gatherings of people suffered tremendously, both in deaths and finances. Cities like St. Louis that quickly shut down public gatherings experienced much less death and better economic outcomes. That kind of comparative historical data and scientific perspective gives us wisdom that can help open our eyes to what we need to know, believe, and do today so that we can have the fullness of life God wants for us.

Knowledge of current happenings and an expert perspective is what climate scientists have also been trying to give us. Fortunately, in the five decades since the first Earth Day, we've had some major victories in regard to water and air pollution and the reduction of deadly chemicals in agriculture. But now, we're facing a global climate crisis like humanity has never seen before. And we have to pay attention to the current events and facts.

For example, here are some details I picked up from an Earth Day program on PBS:

- Based on more than 100 years of temperature data, scientists know that 20 of the world's warmest years occurred in the last 22. They call this "a steady and unremitting temperature trend."
- "Antarctica is losing three times as much ice as it was 25 years ago." "Greenland is losing five times as much ice as it was 25 years ago."
- Melting ice is causing global sea rise and the loss of coastal land.
- If you think that's just hurting people in distant island nations, think again. In the U.S., the state of Louisiana is already losing the equivalent of a football field of land every 45 minutes.
- Louisiana residents can already see that where they used to live is now under water.
- Yes, it will be expensive to switch away from carbon dioxide-emitting fossil fuels.
- But the U.S. government is now spending money to relocate people due to climate change.
- "The economics are really clear on this. The costs of [moving toward renewable energy] are dwarfed by the costs of inaction."*

Unless these things are impacting us personally, it's hard for us to believe they are really happening. But, just like the COVID-19 pandemic seemed unbelievable until it arrived on our doorstep, the climate change crisis is coming with a vengeance. And we immediately need to do what we can to "flatten the curve" with it too. As we pay attention to what's going on around us, and talk about it with each other, we will be more able to believe and respond. As we allow expert scientists to put it into perspective with long-term data from the past and projections for the future, God will be able to open our eyes more and more.

3—BREAKING THE BREAD OF LIFE

Of course, in the Bible story, it took more than a faith walk with friends, conversation about current events, and the wise perspective of experts to open the eyes of the two who were walking to Emmaus. Once they had persuaded Jesus to stay with them for a meal, and Jesus took the bread, blessed it, and broke it—that's when they finally figured it out. That's when their eyes finally opened to see who their guest really was. That's when they perceived that the resurrection was real.

As Christians, we understand this Emmaus story in light of Holy Communion. When we bless and break the bread and eat it in remembrance of Christ, we too are awakened in our spiritual sensibilities. We too are able to see Jesus as the bread that sustains us in this life and the next.

I wonder, though, if such taking, blessing, breaking, and eating also helps us to see more clearly the value of the land, water, and air through which our food grows? I wonder if our sacramental use of the bread of life helps us to see the holiness of grain, soil, and temperature. I wonder if the sacred use of grape juice opens our eyes to the fact that historic grape-growing regions are shifting to the north—opening up new agricultural business opportunities for some, but painfully closing those traditional means of livelihood for others in the south.

Even as the disciples experienced God incarnate in the human flesh of Jesus—through the sacred rituals of communion, we also experience God in the earth and the produce of the land. We remember Jesus' words, "Inasmuch as you did it unto the least of these, you did it unto me." Exploiting the earth is a way of exploiting Christ. Caring for the earth is a way of caring for Christ. Opening our eyes to our planet is another way of allowing God to open our eyes to Jesus who is our bread of life.

CONCLUSION

Several weeks ago, I watched a movie called *Honeyland*. *Honeyland* is a beautifully-made documentary about a woman living in a mountainous region of North Macedonia. In order to give us a peek into Hatidze's life, the filmmakers followed Hatidze around for three years. Through the lens of their camera, we see that Hatidze lives very simply off the land. Her only earnings come from harvesting honey from the wild bees in tree trunks or rock crevices. She lives the way her people had lived for generations, keeping a very careful balance between human needs and the requirements of nature.

In the course of her life, Hatidze takes a nomad boy under her tutelage and teaches him about this method of sustaining life. She tells him that when they harvest the honey, it's half for me and half for the bees. Never take too much. Always leave enough so the bees can keep on living and producing.

Unfortunately, though, the filmmaker's camera also opens our eyes to what happens when this delicate balance is violated. As the boy's father succumbs to financial pressures, he raids all Hatidze's hives, taking too much of the honey. Without their storage of food, the bees then swarm off in search of life somewhere else, leaving Hatidze without a livelihood.

Our conversations together about what is happening around us, the wise perspective of the experts, and the sacred rituals that connect God and earth all help us see how God wants us to live life most fully both now and in the resurrection. As the risen Jesus did with the Emmaus walkers, may God open our eyes.

*<https://video.witf.org/video/climate-change-the-facts-ua6lmf/>