

SERMON TITLE: "Opening the Way: Open Hearts"
SERMON TEXT: Luke 24:13-35
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: April 11, 2021, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Over the past weeks, the crocus, hyacinths, daffodils, narcissus, and tulips in the church flower beds have been opening up their lovely faces to the sun. A few days ago, I noticed white blossoms in some of the trees in the church yard. Likewise, yellow flowers have just opened up on some bushes. And, if you look closely out there, you can see that the blossoms on the flowering crab trees are just on the verge of opening up. One-by-one and batch-by-batch, yellow, purple, blue, red, white, and pink buds have been opening into full flower, flamboyantly and whole-heartedly declaring that God's resurrection of new life has begun.

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. That opened tomb showed the women that God had raised Jesus from the dead. It made it possible for those early disciples to believe, and it opened up resurrection faith to all kinds of people across the centuries since then. This morning, I'm continuing this "Opening the Way" series. As we reflect on our scripture reading from Luke 24, let's consider how God is opening the way for us 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 tagline to describe who we are and what we're about. But "open hearts" isn't something unique to our denomination or this millennium. "Open hearts" is a descriptor that can apply to anyone who has ever had faith in the risen 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 some of them had gone with Jesus to the garden to pray. After Judas betrayed Jesus to the authorities, Jesus was arrested, put on trial, and crucified on Friday. Saturday was the Jewish Sabbath, so everyone stayed put. But, early on Sunday morning, the women had gone to the tomb and found it wide open. An angelic messenger 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 had said. Each of the four gospels records the men's reaction in different ways. In Luke, we're told that the men thought the women were speaking an "idle tale." Only "Peter got up and ran to the tomb" to check it out.

But, later, that same Easter day, while two others of the men were walking home to Emmaus, Jesus caught up with them on the road. At first, the men didn't perceive who the stranger was, but they welcomed his company. After listening to their dialog for a while, Jesus joined in the conversation. He 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 the heart-warming experience described by John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. 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 very discouraged. He was so dispirited, in fact, that 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 in London. There, someone was reading Martin Luther's preface to a commentary on Paul's Letter to the Romans. While he was listening, John Wesley heard something that opened his heart to a profound religious experience. Wesley 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 my 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 behaviors. 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. Christ walked beside us and changed us by opening our hearts.

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 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 already done for us, there is also an active role for us to play now.

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 arrived at Emmaus and Jesus was going to continue on, they “urged him strongly” (v. 29) to stay with them for dinner and overnight. When Jesus called them “foolish” and “slow of heart” (v. 25), they didn’t get offended and reject him. Instead, they listened to his teaching all the more eagerly. Do you hear how much effort they put into this? God was able to open their hearts because they were willing to do their part to welcome the stranger and to pay attention to what he said.

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 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 of forgiveness and salvation with them, so God can

open their hearts, too, with the positive belief in the new life that is possible through the power of Christ's resurrection.

At one of the churches I served in Colorado, there was a member named Ted. 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 a 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 lives. Ted wanted to share his experience, so God could open other people's hearts too.

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 risen 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 welcome and participate in, so that Jesus can also shine out from us to others. In this Easter season, God is opening the way. Let's be a part of that with our open hearts.

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