

“Open Eyes / Open Minds”

Rev. Dr. Peter Bynum

April 14, 2024

²⁵Then [Jesus] said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! ²⁶Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” ²⁷Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. ²⁸As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. ²⁹But they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” So he went in to stay with them.

³⁰When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. ³¹Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. ³²They 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?”

³³That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. ³⁴They were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!” ³⁵Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

³⁶While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” ³⁷They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. ³⁸He said to them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? ³⁹Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” ⁴⁰And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet.

⁴¹While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” ⁴²They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³and he took it and ate in their presence. ⁴⁴Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.”

⁴⁵Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸You are witnesses of these things. (Luke 24:25-48)

This is one of my favorite Easter stories. I didn't read the full text this morning, because it is a little long, so let me set the stage with some background. It is late in the day on the first Easter Sunday. Two followers of Jesus are walking back to their homes in Emmaus, which was about seven miles from Jerusalem. They had followed Jesus there, because they had believed he might be the Messiah, the holy One of God. But over the last few days, those hopes had been crushed. Their own religious leaders had sold Jesus out and condemned him to death. They had witnessed firsthand the kangaroo court before Pilate... been shocked by the bitter cries to spare Barabbas the criminal... watched as Jesus was forced carry his own heavy cross through Jerusalem... winced as the awful nails were pounded into his hands and feet... and watched with horror as the sun turned dark and Jesus breathed his last on the cross. And now the men were walking home, confused, dejected, and broken, because their hope in Jesus was dead.

While they are on the road to Emmaus, a third guy sidles up to them. It is Jesus, the central figure of the past week, the very one they had been talking about and thinking



about on every step of the journey home, but for some reason they cannot see it. The scripture says plainly, "*their eyes were kept from recognizing him.*"

It seems impossible – how people who had been following Jesus step by step for the past week could fail to recognize him. I do have a working theory on this, and it relates to the way we process grief. In her groundbreaking book *On Death and Dying*, the psychiatrist Elisabeth Kubler-Ross surmised that human grief is experienced in stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and ultimately, acceptance. Instead of feeling these step by step, we actually bounce back and forth between them in a mish-mashed jumble of emotions. I think these two guys were caught up in that confusing mish-mash. A friend and mentor had just died, a political and spiritual dream had just died, and those losses left them tied up in emotional knots... so distracted and disoriented that they could not see clearly what – or who – was right in front of them.

That's the part of the story I want to focus on this morning – the fact that the two men on the road were so confused, so depressed, so hurt, and angry about what had happened that they were essentially blinded – and the fact that Jesus, seeing that they needed some help, gave them the help they needed. When they could not recognize him, Jesus opened their eyes. When they could not understand what was happening, Jesus opened their minds and opened the scriptures to them.

The truth is that we all need a little help every now and then. Life has a way of turning us around, blurring our vision, and making us feel lost. Kind of like a "Dizzy Lizzy" relay race. I remember it like it was yesterday, our whole freshman class, as part of orientation, went out on the college lawn. Our hall counselors divided us up into teams for a relay race, then we listened to the rules of the race we were about to run. Each person on the team had to run out about thirty yards to a place where a baseball bat was lying on the grass. You picked up the bat, leaned over so that one end of the bat was on the ground and the other was touching your forehead, and then you held that position while you spun yourself around the bat ten times. Then you dropped the bat and ran back to tag the next runner in line. Hearing the instructions, most of us thought, "No problem. We've got this."

But there was a problem, and we did not have this, because after we'd spun ourselves around that bat ten times, our whole world was spinning. We couldn't see straight let alone run straight. It was an exercise in humility that literally brought many of us to our knees. That's what life can feel like sometimes. We think we have things well in hand, under control, and then – bam -- Dizzy Lizzy.

The thing is, even when life comes at us like that, we still think we can fix it on our own. Maybe it's good old fashioned American work ethic. Maybe we don't want to admit that we need help. Maybe we don't like feeling vulnerable or dependent on others. Maybe we are just blindly arrogant. Whatever the reason, we start acting like we are on that reality TV show "Survivor," and we tell ourselves that, whatever the challenge is, if we just work hard enough and smart enough, we can outwit it, outplay it, outlast it, and win it -- all on our own. But somehow nothing we try seems to make it better. If anything we are just making it worse. We are trying to escape the problem, but everything we do just seems to tie us up into tighter and tighter knots. I'm not saying that we don't try to fix things. What I am saying is that some problems are beyond our capacity to fix, and we can drive ourselves crazy trying to fix them. If it sounds like I am speaking from personal experience on this one, then you are hearing me perfectly.

This is exactly what happened to a struggling father in Mark 9. The man's son had been plagued by debilitating seizures his entire life. The father had tried his best to work the problem and solve the problem, but nothing had worked. He had even approached Jesus' disciples to see if they could heal his son, and they had tried, but they failed, too. With no other place to turn, the father fought his way through the crowd to get to Jesus. "*If you are able to do anything,*" the man said to Jesus, "*have pity on us and help us.*"

Jesus replied, "*If you are able! —All things can be done for the one who believes.*"

Immediately the father fell down on his knees and cried out, "*I believe; help my unbelief!*"¹ The father had gone as far as he possibly could on his own steam. He could not carry the burden any farther. If the solution was belief, he wanted to believe completely, but he could not make himself believe completely. All he could do was ask for help. "*Help me. I want to believe. Help my unbelief.*" The man asked for help from God, and he got it. Christ opened his eyes, opened his mind, and opened a door into hope.

Everybody needs a little help every now and then, and sometimes the help we need cannot be found anywhere but in heaven. The author Anne Lamott has said that the two best prayers she knows are "Help me, help me, help me," and "Thank you, thank you, thank you." And over the years she has learned to pray both of those prayers much more frequently. For much of her life, she reacted to problems like we tend to do. If someone or something was causing her pain or frustration, she would engineer a strategy to fix that problem. When that didn't work, she got another idea, and then another idea. And before long, she found she had tied herself in a dizzying array of emotional knots. Meanwhile, not one thing about that original problem had changed.

Eventually, she found a way to keep from locking herself up in these kinds of spirals. She calls it a "God box," "a modest tool for letting go."² Over the years she has used all kinds of containers – the glove compartment in her car, pill boxes, or little boxes specifically made and decorated by friends. The key, she says, is that the box has to be a physical box. "The container has to exist in time and space," she writes, "so you can see yourself let go in time and space."

And that is exactly what the God box helps her to do. "On a note," she explains, "I write down the name of the person about whom I am so distressed or angry, or describe the situation that is killing me, with which I am so toxically, crazily obsessed, and I fold the note up, stick it in the box, and close it." "You might have a brief moment of prayer," she continues, "and it might come out sounding like this: 'Here, God. You think you're so big? Fine. You deal with it. Although I have a few more excellent ideas on how best to proceed.' Then I agree to keep my sticky mitts off the spaceship until I hear back."³

It might seem a little simple and childish, she says, but this way of asking God for help was born out of the pain she was causing herself in not being able to let go of something. It was a way to "summon a childlike courage and faith and put a note with a few words into a box in the hope that we can get our sucking inky squid tentacles off things."⁴

And she says she always hears back from God. Not in skywriting or a booming voice from heaven, but in a letter, an email, or the voice of a friend. And it might not come today,

¹ Mark 9:17-29.

² Anne Lamott, *Help. Thanks. Wow.* (New York: Riverhead, 2012), p.36.

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.* at 37-38.

or exactly when you want it to come. “But you will hear back,” she writes. “You will come to know.” If we can let go, for just a moment, and ask God for help, then we leave room for God to open our eyes, open our hearts, and open the death grip that we are trying to hold on so many aspects of our lives.

And those two men on the road to Emmaus? They received the gift of this opening up without even having to ask. Christ knew what they needed even before they did... which, by the way, is how God works. “*O LORD, you have searched me and known me,*” the psalmist writes. “*You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely.*”⁵

Or as Paul writes in Romans, “*the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart,*” knows exactly what we really need.⁶

There is a prayer that I keep on my desk, right where I can see it every day. I keep it there for those times when life makes me feel a little lost or dizzy or disoriented... times when I realize that I am tying myself in knots trying to work something out, but I seem to be getting in my own way. The prayer was written by the Catholic mystic Thomas Merton, and it goes like this:

“My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this, you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it.”

Or, if you prefer a simpler one: “Help me, Lord. I am dizzy, disoriented, I am just making it worse. What I need is your help. Open my eyes. Open my mind. Show me the way. Help me. Help me. Help me. I believe that you can, help me believe that you will.”

Amen.

⁵ Psalm 139:1-4.

⁶ Romans 8:26-27.