

Prelude: Chopin: Valse (Op. 69, Nr.2)

Hello everyone! This is Pastor Melinda from Shiloh UCC. Tancrede and probably Sophia will be helping me with today's Sunday service, too. Let's start with a Prelude!

Luke 24:44-53

44Then (Jesus) 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. 49And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

50Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them.

51While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.

52And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; 53and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Hymn #499 In All Our Living

“With the Eyes of your Heart”

Often, it’s hard to understand why things happen. It’s especially difficult to understand the painful events in our lives; when we lose someone, when a marriage ends, when we lose a job, or when we are locked up and separated during this virus outbreak. Some things in life are just difficult to understand.

The disciples were also going through some difficult times. The faithful just saw their master die on a cross. They thought they lost their teacher forever. Then the resurrection happened. The disciples must have been confused. But what do we read in our text? Jesus “opened their minds to understand the scriptures.” Jesus “opened their minds” to all the hidden secrets of the Bible.

How did he do this? It is simple. Jesus calmed their souls with the presence of God. He comforted their souls so that a spiritual awakening was possible. Jesus calmed all the fear and confusion so that the disciples’ minds opened up.

How amazing is it when we can listen to each other with “open minds”? How amazing is it when we can have a real, meaningful conversation; a caring and loving relationship? How amazing is it when your “mind is open” to truly listen to the other person.

But here, Jesus did something even more amazing. He opened their minds to understand the scriptures. Jesus explained to them "the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms."

What does this mean? In Hebrew the Tanak is divided into three sections. There is the Torah, the 5 books of Moses, or sometimes called the “Law of Moses”, the Nevi'im, the historical books, or literally "the prophets", and the Ketuvim, the wisdom literature, or literally "the writings".

In Jesus' time the Old Testament and the New Testament we know today, didn't exist in the form we have it. The New Testament hadn't been written down yet. The Old Testament was a bunch of separate scrolls which had not yet been canonized. So, when Jesus taught his disciples about the Messiah "in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms," he was explaining the meaning of the Hebrew Bible to them even before the Hebrew Bible existed or was even called the “Bible”.

Jesus opened his disciples' minds to understand the Hebrew Scriptures in a new way. He taught them what the scriptures said about the Messiah. He helped them look at the scriptures from a different perspective. He helped them read the Bible with the eyes of their heart.

I know that many of you love and read the Bible. That's why you come to church on Sundays, too (you know in the good, old days, when we had Sunday worship services in the Sanctuary. ☺) If you love and read the Bible and you ask God to speak to you, you will also be able to read it with the eyes of your heart.

Sometimes, there are strange words or expressions, especially in the Hebrew Scriptures that we do not understand. Instead of being stuck on one word or a few expressions, you can ask the Holy Spirit to reveal the meaning, then calmly wait for an answer. If you are patient, the Holy Spirit will "open up your mind" to the devotional meaning of the text. If you are still stumped, you can always call me, and we can struggle with the verses together. :)

During these difficult days when we are still locked up in our homes and there is still scary news on TV our greatest consolation comes from God. How do we connect with God? Through prayer, meditation, reading of the Bible and when possible, coming to church.

Being with Jesus must have been like being in church. The disciples received a sermon from Jesus, too. During his "mini sermon," Jesus gave a task to his followers. He sent them out into the world to spread the good news. Jesus said: "You are witnesses of these things." All disciples, all followers of Christ, have the task to talk about God's love, to tell others about Jesus, and to invite them to God's table.

The Greek word we find in our text is μαρτυρες - "witness" that comes from the shorter form, μαρτυς (24:48). The Greek word for witness is "martyros" from which our English word martyr comes. In its original context, it was a simple legal connotation, which meant to give testimony, or generally, to speak on someone's behalf.

With so many Christians being persecuted by the Roman Empire, its meaning evolved to both mean to give testimony, and also to suffer for this proclamation. So here Jesus (literally) says, "You are martyrs of these things." It means: "You will talk about God's deeds and God's love to others, even if you have to suffer for it."

As hard as it may sound, this is also a blessing. Suffering for the Gospel is a privilege. It's also a privilege to talk about spirituality. It's an honor to spread God's love and compassion in the world. Want it or not, we are Christ's witnesses to our friends, family members, and even strangers.

People who know that we are church going people expect us to say something about our faith. Even when we do not say a word, our deeds speak loud and clear. In fact, our behavior is like a speaker phone which tells the whole world what's in our heart.

The "mini sermon" Jesus gave his disciples continues with the promise of the Holy Spirit. Remember, next week is Pentecost. The Holy Spirit is knocking on our soul's door. Jesus sent the Spirit to comfort, help, and inspire all disciples. Jesus's promise of the Holy Spirit made the first disciples rejoice.

I wonder how focusing on the works and blessings of the Holy Spirit would make us feel now? Will our hearts rejoice? Will we relax for a moment and give our worries and fears to Christ? Will our minds, "open up"?

The Holy Spirit is the one who is constantly inspiring, teaching, and comforting us. The Holy Spirit also wants us to rejoice, and maybe even laugh a little. So, let me share with you a cute joke about misunderstandings.

One Sunday a pastor told his congregation that the church needed some extra money and asked the people to prayerfully consider giving a little extra in the offering plate. He said that whoever gave the most would be able to pick out three hymns.

After the offering, the pastor noticed that someone had placed a check for \$1,000 in the offering plate. He was so excited, that he immediately shared his joy with his congregation, and said he'd like to thank the person who gave the donation.

Rosie, a little old lady in the back pew, shyly raised her hand. The pastor asked her to come to the front. Slowly, she made her way to the front of the pews. The pastor told her how wonderful it was that she gave so much to the congregation, and asked her to pick out three hymns.

Rosie's eyes brightened as she looked over the congregation. She pointed to the three most handsome men in the sanctuary and said, "I'll take him and him and him!"

It's a blessing to laugh on Ascension Sunday. It's OK to smile. It's OK to be joyful disciples every day of our lives. It is good to laugh. However, the greatest blessing in the Ascension story is when Jesus leads the disciples to Bethany, and, "lifting up his hands, he blessed them." The first disciples received the greatest honor and joy; they were blessed by the departing Jesus. This was the last blessing on earth that Jesus performed. During that last benediction he was carried up into Heaven.

After his ascension we can only see Jesus with the eyes of our hearts. The immortal invisible God is not a sense object that walks among us in a physically recognizable form. God is so much more. However, we can get limited glimpses of the Divine when we recognize Christ in our brothers and sisters, and every single child of God.

At the end of our story, Jesus didn't just disappear and leave the disciples confused. Before he ascended to heaven Jesus blessed them. Like at the end of a great worship service, Jesus ends his "mini-sermon" and last teaching event with a blessing. This blessing filled the disciples with hope. They had the strength and energy to start building the church. They received enough hope and joy that they shared it with everyone they met. They became martyrs, witnesses of God's love, and their lives changed the whole world. The Empire was brought to its knees by regular people whose minds were opened up so that they thought with the heart.

If you read Acts you will learn that Steven was the first martyr stoned to death for the gospel. Tradition also says that Peter was crucified upside down, and that Paul also died for the gospel. But what is more impressive than the martyrs mentioned in the Bible, are all the unnamed Christians who trusted Jesus under the rule of Nero and Domitian. They went to their graves without fear, or hesitation. They anonymously faced lions, fire, and torture, all for the Gospel. So it may be an uncomfortable sacrifice to tell your neighbor about the joy you find at church, but it isn't necessarily as scary as the games in the Coliseum.

The martyrs faced death with great joy, for they knew Jesus is risen. If Jesus has ascended, of what shall we be afraid? If we shall live forever what power does Covid-19 have? If we truly have faith in Jesus' ascension, there is nothing to fear.

But let's get back to our story. We read that after the blessing, the disciples "worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God."

There is nothing more that I want for you today than joy and inner peace. There is nothing more that we need on our journey. The ups and downs of life will not carry us on an emotional rollercoaster if our hearts and minds are safely in the hands of God.

I know we all struggle sometimes, so don't be too hard on yourself if you are not joyful or fully at peace. This is why we come to church. This is why we tape these imperfect services from the LaMontagne residence. We come to church to return to God, to rediscover our hidden joy and peace, and to remember to see with the eyes of our hearts. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Everlasting God, we thank you for all the blessings we receive in your presence. We thank you for your peace that is wider than the ocean, for the hope that gives us strength to put one foot in front of the other, and the joy that fills our hearts in both good and bad times.

Inspire us through the Ascension story that we may be filled with excitement. Thank you for teaching us about the scriptures, giving us the promise of the Holy Spirit, and sending us out in the world as your witnesses. Thank you for opening up our minds and making us your martyrs. Give us courage to talk about your unconditional love to others.

Today we also intercede for the peace of our families, churches, our country, and the world. Send harmony and reconciliation into all of our lives, and encourage us to work for justice and peace.

Generous and gracious God, heal the sick and comfort the weak. Be with those in hospitals, nursing homes, and confined to their own homes. Be with the lonely and sad. Heal our world from this terrible epidemic. On this Memorial Day weekend, we are also grateful for the people who sacrificed everything for our safety. Be with the family members and friends of those who serve in the armed forces currently. Comfort those who have lost their loved ones in the service of our country.

At this time we also pray for the people on our Prayer list. We rejoice with those who are celebrating a graduation, a birthday, or other happy event. Remind us, loving God to be joyful in your presence. Loving Christ, send your Holy Spirit to all of us, so that we may feel your presence. Inspire us to be your witnesses to the end of the world. Amen.

Lord's Prayer

Hymn #433 "In the Bulb There Is a Flower"

<https://www.hopepublishing.com/find-hymns-hw/hw3983.aspx>

Benediction: And now may the Almighty God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be with you and remain with you always. Amen.

Thank you for watching! Happy Sunday everyone!