

The Power of an Open Mind

Ascension Day

Seventh Sunday of Easter

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Jill R. Russell

Texts: Acts 1.1-11;
Psalm 47;
Ephesians 1.15-23;
Luke 24.44-53

I want to begin this morning with a little extension on the conversation I began with the children a moment ago. A little church calendar trivia if you will. I went through all of the seasons with the kids which are based on the life and ministry of Jesus. Anyone know which of the seasons is the longest (besides ordinary time)? It's actually the season of Easter. Advent is 4 weeks, Lent is 6, and Eastertide is 7 weeks. All of it culminating on this day, the Ascension of the Lord.

There are some rich theological themes inherent in this day like the one I spoke of with the children: the way in which this day represents the full circle that joins divine and human life. God coming to dwell with humanity in the person of Jesus and now in the resurrected and ascended body of our Lord humanity is coming to dwell with God. It is a beautiful picture of how God's life and our life is joined for eternity.

Another theme of this day is the work that Jesus is doing in this text and really throughout the whole of his time after the resurrection to help his disciples to shift their focus from what Jesus has done to what they will do in his name. Acts 1 opens with the disciples asking "Is this the time when **you** will restore the kingdom to Israel?" And Jesus responds by saying "Wrong question...it's not your business to know the time or the periods...what IS your business is to know that **you** will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes so that **you** will be my witnesses to the very ends of the earth."¹

¹ My rendering using poetic license to summarize Acts 1.6-8.

There are enough themes of this day that Jerry VanHeest's father, also a minister, wrote a short book on theological significance of this day. For a day that barely registers on most people's radar, there is a lot here for our reflection.

I want to share with you now the piece of the passage that stood out in my hearing of it this time around: from Acts chapter 1 verse 3: "After his suffering, Jesus presented himself alive to them...."² I've always taken this verse by the writer of Luke-Acts (because it's the same author who wrote them both) as a proof text for those who didn't believe that Jesus was physically raised from the dead. After all, he uses the word proof in the very next phrase: "...Jesus presented himself alive to them with many convincing proofs..."

But when hearing it this time, I heard an entirely different purpose behind these words. Not an argument about the physical resurrection of Jesus' body but rather I heard a description of the work that the Holy Spirit has been doing since the beginning of time. I heard in this verse how the season of Easter and this story of Ascension is a study in resilience and defiance; a refusal to let suffering or oppression destroy the work of God's Spirit in the world! "After his suffering, Jesus presented himself ALIVE!" Why? "To keep speaking about the kingdom of God."³

That's why Jesus came: to speak about the realm of God, to point toward that realm, to embody those ways of God. When the powers of this world both political and religious did their worst to shut him down; when they thought he was dead and his followers were cowering in fear; when they thought that by killing his body they could kill God's kingdom -- he presented himself ALIVE.

I wrote a note to myself in the margins when I was reading this text, a note about the Spirit who will not be silenced or held back or shut down no matter what the powers of this world may do. I wrote the words - SHE PERSISTED. That really is the story of God's Spirit at work in the world. A

² Acts 1. 3a, NRSV

³ Acts 1.3c, NRSV

persistence that is both resilient and defiant: “After his suffering Jesus presented himself alive to them.... speaking about the kingdom of God.”

This persistence? This resilient and defiant power is not just located inside of Jesus. In both Luke 24 and in Acts 1 Jesus promises that this power of persistence and resilience will be poured out on all of them and all of us: “You will receive power (Jesus said) when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses....”⁴

Now there was a second phrase that stood out in my hearing of these texts this week. When Jesus in Luke 24 is reminding them of all that he has spoken while he was with him the passages tells us “Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures...”⁵

I realized when I read it that the link between the power of the Holy Spirit at work through Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit at work through the disciples begins in this moment when Jesus opens their minds. They were fixated on the person of Jesus about who he was and what he would do. And as he opened their minds to understand the scriptures about this kingdom he had come to proclaim, the focus was shifting to who **they** would be and what **they** would do.

As you move through the book of Acts each time they bump up against some barrier or some resistance, the Spirit would do this work of opening their minds. The story of Peter and Cornelius in Acts chapter 10 is a vivid illustration of the power of an opened mind. The disciples were having trouble with this mandate to bring their witness to the ends of the earth because it would clearly bring them into Gentile territory. Peter was fixated (as they all were) on a certain set of purity codes from the Hebrew scriptures that taught him that Gentiles were unclean. He could not enter their home. He could not share with them a meal. He could not (in other words) love these neighbors as he loved himself. The Spirit through a vision helped him to ask a whole different set of questions that unraveled what he had always seen before. Not just how he viewed the scripture itself

⁴ Acts 1.8, NRSV

⁵ Luke 24.45, NRSV

but shifted in fundamental ways how he saw the world and the ways he approached the relationships of his life. That's the power of an open mind. Every movement of reform and every milestone of social justice begins with this power.

On Tuesday, several of us attended the Summit on Race and Inclusion. I've found over the last several years that this event is one of those "opening of my mind" kind of places. Make no mistake! The Holy Spirit knows no boundaries when it comes to the work of making all things new! Peter was in a trance on the top of the roof when the Spirit opened his mind. The disciples in our text today were simply gathered with Jesus as he said good-bye to them. It happens in prayer circles, worship services, and bible studies to sure but it also happens reading books and talking to neighbors and making music, creating art, and doing research.

For the keynote speaker we heard on Tuesday, Dr. Phil Goff, it happened when he was looking for statistics that would explain what has been happening between the African American community and police departments. He knew lots of anecdotal stories but he was looking for research....data. He never found it so he determined to create it. This was quite a number of years ago. He is now the director of the Center for Policing Equity. He is widely respected by Police Departments across the country because of the respect that he brings to those departments and to the work that they do and because of the effectiveness of his research on improving police-community relations.⁶

I wish I had time to share the full effect of his keynote speech because it was so fascinating. I felt as if I was watching the power of an open mind happening right in front of my eyes. He was reflecting on the obvious increase of racial inequity happening in our nation. Just about anything you can measure from economic factors to educational levels to incarceration rates to health indices shows that there is a gap of an alarming nature between certain racial groups within our country. At the

⁶ The following link brings you to a version of the research and presentation that Dr. Goff shared at the Summit on Race and Inclusion: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qQQm3cDnYkU>

same time, stereotypes and racial prejudice has increasingly diminished over time. Racial prejudice has gone down but inequity has gone up.

As someone who was clearly formed by the faith of us his upbringing – he made a passing reference to his love for the black church – he knew that this was not right. Maybe it was a passage like Galatians 3.28 teaches us that “There is NO LONGER Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female for we are all one in Christ Jesus.” He was looking at stark realities that make clear that we are not living into this piece of God’s realm. He wanted to understand why and what we could do about it.

His mind was opened as he started study the complexities that explain this data. There is far more going on than people’s racial attitudes whether conscious or unconscious. He shared with us some of the traps that we all fall into with our behavior that contributes to these inequities. He shared how that has been playing out in police departments and how making changes in policy and practice based on this research has dramatically changed stats like the use of force among responding officers.

Whether he would say so or not (and I actually think he might) I say it was the Holy Spirit who opened his mind to ask the questions that put him on this path of actually making an impact for racial equity in this country.....helping us to live into Galatians 3.28. I felt more hope sitting his lecture than I had felt in a very long time.

On the day of his ascension Jesus turned to his disciples and said “You will receive power to be my witnesses to the very ends of the earth.” A power that Jesus demonstrated with his disciples when he opened their minds to the scriptures.

Thanks be to God for the power of an open mind. And may we pray for the Spirit to persist in bringing that power to work in us and in the church and in all of the places where God’s realm is seeking to break in....which is every square inch of this world.

For the Ascension of our Lord, thanks be to God!