

## *Opening Our Minds to God and to the Bible • Luke 24:36-49*

Charleen and I were flying from Denver to Minneapolis on what seemed like a routine Northwest flight. We were on time. The weather was good. It seemed like a normal approach for a routine landing. Just as we neared the runway the engines surged, the plane groaned with acceleration and soon banked hard to the right. For a moment all conversation inside the cabin ceased. Then suddenly everyone began talking about the abrupt change in direction. Something important had happened. Actually, not something; it was someone. Air Force One had arrived in the area. Our flight was waved off to make room for the President of the United States.

Once long ago there was another interruption in conversation when everything and everyone suddenly stopped. It was not so much what had happened as who had arrived. The once dead Jesus showed up for all of them to see. They had heard that he was alive, but seeing Jesus for themselves was still a shock. *“While they were . . . talking . . . Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’* That was a very ordinary greeting, sort of like walking up to a group of people and saying, “Hi!” But they were dumbstruck by this.

There is an old story about a man who walked through a cemetery late one night and fell into an open grave that had been dug in preparation for a burial that was to take place the next morning. He tried to climb out but the sides were slippery from rain and he could not make it. He finally decided to sleep in the hole that night and get help to climb out the next morning. A few hours later another person took a shortcut across the cemetery and fell into the same grave. As he tried to climb out of the hole, he heard a voice from inside the grave simply say, “You can’t get out of here.” But, he did!

The point is that the very thought of a dead person moving and talking is enough to spook just about anyone.

The whole group saw Jesus alive! They heard him say, “Hi!” They saw, but they did not believe—because truth and belief are two very different things. Sometimes we believe what is not true and other times we doubt what is obviously true. *“They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost.”* Because they could not deny their experience they found an alternative explanation so they would not have to believe that Jesus had come back to life again.

Their doubts were real. Some would say their doubts were absolutely normal and legitimate. And Jesus did exactly what he always does for sincere doubters. He gave proof to help them believe.

Evidence number one was his appearance. He proved himself to their sense of sight.

Evidence number two was his voice. He proved himself to their sense of hearing. *“He said to them, ‘Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself!’ ”*

Evidence number three was his body. He proved himself to their sense of touch:

*“Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.”*

*When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet.*

Are you familiar with what is called the skeptic’s prayer? A skeptic is someone who has

trouble believing. There are those who struggle to believe but find it hard. There are so many questions and too many doubts. If they are sincere seekers for truth, there is a prayer that may be helpful. It goes like

this: “God, if there is a God, please show yourself to me. Help me see your truth and believe.” There are tens of thousands of people who have sincerely prayed such a prayer and sincerely searched for the truth that have come to resounding Christian faith. While it does not have the

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same results for everyone, it is a good place for doubters to get started.

For those that day who saw, heard and touched Jesus there was an interesting transition in their disbelief. We are told, *“They still did not believe it because of joy and amazement.”* That is different. It is sort of “disbelieving belief”. It is like the woman who answers the doorbell to be told that she just won the Publisher’s Clearinghouse Million Dollar Sweepstakes and gets so excited that she says, “Me? Who me? I have never won anything!” and then slams the door in the presenter’s face.

*“They did not believe it because of joy and amazement.”* I think they really did believe!

Jesus pulled up a chair, ordered some broiled fish to eat and started teaching them his last instructions before returning to heaven.

There is something special about last words. They may be the last instructions to your five-year-old before going to kindergarten for the first time. They may be the exhortations of a commencement speech for a high school or college graduating class. They may be the last letter leading to the end of a relationship, a “last will and testament” or the final sentences on a deathbed. They are special. They are different. And so it was with the final four teachings of Jesus before leaving earth and returning to his home in heaven.

First of all, Jesus taught that his life, death and resurrection fulfilled biblical prophecy. *“He said to them, ‘This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.’ ”*

The Jewish Bible is not organized the same way our English Bible is. While the same content exists in the Old Testament, it is in a very different order in the Jewish Bible. There are three sections in the Jewish Bible: the Law of Moses; the Prophets; and the Psalms. Jesus is saying that when you read through the Old Testament it is full of prophesies about him. In the Garden of Eden there is the prediction of the coming of a Savior. The prophet Micah tells that the Messiah will be born in the little village of Bethlehem. Isaiah describes a suffering Messiah that is an uncanny description of the suffering that takes

place in crucifixion. Jesus is saying that he was no surprise to God or to history. All of this was part of the divine plan that was very old. God knew what he was doing. God predicted what he would do. God did it all through Jesus.

Jesus condensed and summarized the prophecies of the Old Testament with his teaching in the New Testament, saying, *“The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.”* Before returning to heaven Jesus wanted to make sure that they (and we!) got it. Jesus Christ is God’s way to salvation. This was God’s plan from the start. He died to be our Savior, paying the price for human sin and providing the way to heaven forever.

His second final teaching was that our thinking must be illumined. Luke 24:45 explains that Jesus *“opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.”* There is a very great and powerful truth here. It is that we cannot truly understand the Bible by ourselves. We need the light of God to be able to see the truth. We need for Jesus Christ to open our minds in order to understand what the Bible says. Reading the Bible is not just an intellectual experience; it is a spiritual experience. It is a means to encounter God. Unless God is involved, the Bible is just words and stories and teaching like any other book.

My father was pretty healthy for most of his life. Then, in his seventies he became seriously ill and went through several hospitalizations, surgery, blood transfusions and massive antibiotic therapy. One day he told me something I did not know about him, a change that had recently occurred in his life. He told me that although he had been with many people through the crises of their lives he never had a lot of sympathy for people who were sick. He thought they were sort of wimps. He could not understand why they complained and did not just get better. But, he explained, lying in a hospital bed, desperately ill and maybe dying, he understood others as he never understood them before. In other words, his experience opened his understanding in a way that objective observation never could do.

Jesus taught that an intellectual reading of the

Bible is never enough. Unless a person experiences Jesus Christ, the Bible will never be understood. We can have an IQ of 200, a Ph.D. in biblical studies, be able to sight read Hebrew and Greek and still not understand the Scriptures. We need the light of God. We need the experience of Jesus Christ.

Every time we open the Bible to read it we should begin with a prayer asking for divine understanding. We should expect more than words. We should expect to experience God.

I have heard many reports from those who have found the Bible boring and difficult to understand until Jesus Christ changed their lives. Then they could not put the Bible down. They read it and loved it and understood it for the very first time. They (and we) are just like those to whom Jesus gave his last instructions—*“he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.”*

Final teaching number three was that the story must be told. Jesus told them, *“You are witnesses of these things.”* It only makes sense. If this is God’s historic plan for human salvation, if Jesus is the fulfillment of prophecy, if salvation from sin and eternal life comes through Jesus Christ, if the Bible is true, if Jesus transforms our lives and thinking and if we experience this for ourselves, we must be witnesses of these things!

As Christians we don’t have to be trained theologians or professional evangelists, but we must tell what we have experienced through Jesus Christ. The way we do it should fit our personalities and relationships, but tell we must! Christianity is a word-of-mouth revolution. It does not primarily spread through television ads or religious events. It spreads through our witnessing—telling what we have experienced. Eighty-five percent of Americans who come to Christian faith do so through the influence of a friend or a family member. In Jesus’ last instructions he wanted to make sure we knew that telling the story is up to us.

Jesus’ fourth and final teaching before return-

ing to heaven was that power must be provided from God. Referring to the coming of the Holy Spirit, Jesus said, *“I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”* Jesus knew we would need help to live the kind of lives God wants us to live. Life is hard and we are weak. The challenges are beyond our resources. So, God promised to send the Holy Spirit to earth to live inside of every Christian.

The Holy Spirit is God, just as much God as the Father is God and just as much God as Jesus the Son is God. However, the Holy Spirit, unlike Jesus, does not have a body and is, therefore, invisible. Invisible does not mean less God or less powerful. God promised that the Holy Spirit would come to live inside every Christian and give us the power to face life and have joy, to be the witnesses for Jesus Christ that he called us to be and to get us through death and into heaven forever.

Jesus taught that he would first leave and go back to heaven and then he would send the Holy Spirit from heaven to earth to take his place. He also told them to stick around in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit arrived (which was a few weeks later on the holiday called Pentecost).

Jesus did what he said he would do. He sent the Holy Spirit and ever since then the Holy Spirit has lived in every Christian as the power source for liv-

ing. Some tap into his power; some try to live without the power of the Spirit.

In hot weather there are two ways to run an air conditioner. We can run it with just the fan or with the fan and compressor. If it is a hot day we can run the fan for 24 hours and just stir up the hot air. The fan cannot cool by itself. Turn on the compressor and the air will cool. We need the power of the compressor to change the temperature.

So it is with our lives. We can live by our own power just moving the hot air around, or we can tap into the power of the Holy Spirit of God.

*If you could ask Jesus for one thing about your relationship to God what would you ask for?*

The question is: how do we get the Spirit's power in our lives? The answer is really very simple. We must want it, believe and ask for it.

Jesus finished his final four teachings.

*When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.*

In some ways this does not totally make sense. It makes sense that Jesus went back to heaven. That was his home and he went there to prepare a place for us to live forever. He wanted to make heaven our home as well. So, in that sense, his return to heaven makes sense.

But what is harder to understand is the response of his friends. They had witnessed the crucifixion and were convinced they had lost Jesus forever. Then he came back to life and they were thrilled to get him back. Then he takes off and leaves them again for heaven. And their response is worship, joy and praise to God. Does that figure?

Yes! Worship, joy and praise makes sense if you believe that God's prophecy is fulfilled, if your thinking has been illumined, if you have a story to tell and if you can count on the power of the Holy Spirit to transform you on the inside.

So, are you transformed? Has Jesus Christ opened your understanding to the Bible? Are you living by the power of the Holy Spirit? If yes, then you can worship, you have joy and you praise God.

I have a question for you. If you could ask Jesus for one thing about your relationship with God, what would you ask him for? Don't let it be about your job or money or health or house or car or family or friends. It's okay to talk to God about those things, but if you were to ask Jesus for one thing about your relationship to God, what would that one thing be? Would you ask Jesus to become your Savior? Would you ask for forgiveness for some particular sin? Would you ask him to help you understand the Bible? Would you ask him to help you tell other people the story of Jesus? Would you ask for the power of the Spirit of God in your life? If you could ask Jesus for one thing about your relationship to God what would you ask for?

Ask Jesus now for the one thing you most want in your relationship with God.

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