

Got Fish?

Luke 24: 36b-48

The Reverend Erica Wimber Avena

April 18, 2021

Prayer: Use our questions and the burdens on our hearts, O God, to open our understanding of the scriptures. Help us to see the possibilities you set before us as your children when we turn from lies and live by your truth. Strengthen our faith and our love today...

In this morning's scripture, the culmination of the Easter story, Jesus helped the disciples to understand the scriptures. He says this: "everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then, "he opened their minds to understand the scriptures." And they understood what the prophecies meant: that the Messiah would die and be raised again on the third day for the forgiveness of sins. And that this should be proclaimed beginning in Jerusalem, and reaching all the way to West Hartford, CT... Simsbury, Farmington, Avon, Storrs...

Obviously, it does not say West Hartford, in the Bible, but it means that. Clearly.

One of my New Testament professors, Richard Hayes, has written a recent essay in this collection which I borrowed from the JP Webster library¹ in which he says that all of scripture needs to be read, in his words, with "a hermeneutic of resurrection." Meaning, all of it, Old Testament law, prophets, writings, New Testament gospels and letters makes sense ultimately when read in light of the resurrection of Christ. In light of Easter. Resurrection is the key that unlocks the meaning of the book. It is also the key that unlocks our own futures.

This is a big cosmic idea, and also a small practical one. The entire history previous to the life of Jesus, can be interpreted in light of his resurrection, but also we are invited by the risen Christ to understand our own life history in light of future resurrection.

What does today's Covid19 mean in light of resurrection? What does the Black Lives Matter movement mean in light of resurrection? What do your previous mistakes (all of them – big and small) mean in light of resurrection? What does the death of a loved one mean in light of resurrection? All regrets, disappointments, failures, and yes the worst mistakes are subject to resurrection. Resurrection puts them in perspective, you might say resurrection level-sets our lives. For a person of faith, resurrection means that even our worst past mistakes can be bent towards future blessing by a living God.

It is a lot to get your head around.

Here at the end of Luke, Jesus was establishing his resurrection by appearing to his disciples, who at first thought he was a ghost. A ghost was about the most frightening thing they could

¹ *The Art of Reading Scripture*, ed Ellen Davis and Richard Hays, Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2003 pp. 237

think of. Jesus proves he is living by appearing to them, wounds and all, and eats a fish dinner with them. Ghosts do not eat fish, do they? The fact that he ate with them helped them to figure out what had happened. It begins to fall into place in this shared meal.

He is not a ghost...he is alive...what manner of truth is this? What does that prove? What does it mean? Most of us when we say that something is true mean that it is a fact. But there are a lot of ways of discovering facts. I was an English major back in the day, and as an English major you get a long running meditation on the nature of truth... ironically, by reading fiction. Fiction is not true, but great fiction is meaningful and we love it because it conveys important truths. A well written book can feel more true than life itself. Most of us will put down a book, or turn off a program or movie if we find we don't like any of the characters, and have stopped caring about what happens to them. If it doesn't "ring true."

- Margaret Mitchell's book *Gone with the Wind* is all fiction, but for generations it encapsulated, better than any other single work, the issues, at the heart of the Civil War. The way of life that was at stake, the relationships that had grown up around that way of life.
- John Grisham wrote a book called "The Firm" which is a very accurate portrayal of the American legal system, all of it fiction.

Fiction and non-fiction, poetry and biography could all be said to be true or truthful. And you expect them to be true in different ways. When Jesus opened the minds of the disciples to understand the scriptures he opened their minds to understand truth in a whole variety of types of literature, as well as to see its application for their own day. The Bible contains: history, law, poetry, prophesy, prayers, proverbs, sermons, parables, genealogies and census reports, polemics, letters, affirmations, allegories and eye-witness accounts. Some of it written in good times, other parts written during deep persecution. All of it is true, all of it attests in some manner, to God. Jesus opened their minds to this. To the truth of it all, how it fits together, how the old prophecies are fulfilled, how God's purpose has been the same from the beginning, how he himself went through his life and suffered death for this: to call a people to himself. And the fact that he was standing there, in the flesh, attests to the truth of its promises -- past, present, and future.

Living a life of faith means living into that moment when the scriptures opened, every day. If you have a practice of reading scripture, you will find that in time scripture reads you.

Did this truly happen, just the way Luke tells it? I don't know...I wasn't there...but I do know that it is true. I am an eye witness to just this kind of thing.

It does not happen all the time, but sometimes what Luke describes truly happens. It happens often in this room, people come in, they are not sure what to expect, worn out from some major issues they've been carrying, frightened. A lot of us arrive here with a lot more doubt than faith. Then as we move through the service, something happens. In song, in prayer, in scripture and meditation. There is a presence, mysterious, inexplicable, but nevertheless real. It doesn't just

happen here, but it happens here. Being away from this space has made it more important for some.

We are holding a blessing of animals today. Many people report a shared spiritual experience with a pet or animal in their yard or home. An unmistakable and unexpected presence in their lives, reminding them of God's unpredictable wildness, or, God's abiding love. A bird appears where there was nothing, and something about its surprising presence...reminds you... of someone, something important...

We are reminded of who God is, God's immense love, and we are reminded of our own best selves the beloved child of God that is at the center of our identities.

We are not here because we understand everything in the Bible or ever will. We are not here to tell other people how they have got it wrong. We are here as those listening, waiting for Jesus, to come and stand among us. And he does. He heals our doubts, calms our fears, strengthens us and reveals himself and his word in us.

If the scriptures are opened to you, you will understand that the prophecies are being fulfilled, that the parables are a guide to living, that the law is good, that the history of God with a covenant people has mattered, that the polemics are for Christ's sake, that the letters are for the up-building of the body of Christ, and that the poetry still carries divine truth; if we understand all this, it is not because we are smarter than other people. It is a gift; part of Jesus' promise to come to us, not to leave us alone, to give us what we need to be the body of Christ today – even all the way out here in West Hartford.

You are witnesses to these things. It is true. Right where you are, he is close.

© 2021 The Rev. Erica Wimber Avena

First Church West Hartford
12 South Main Street
West Hartford, CT 06107