

“Open Minds”

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1 John 3:1-3 Luke 24:36-49

Do you think of yourself as open-minded? No one really *wants* to be close-minded. We think of close-minded people as ignorant, or stubborn, or fearful and self-protective. And they can drive us crazy by ignoring what *we* believe is reality. But isn't everyone, on some level, ignorant, stubborn and self-protective? After all, we're human beings, and we are limited by our experiences. And we all have a natural drive to take care of ourselves. All of us do.

During Lent a few of you picked up the book No Future Without Forgiveness by Bishop Desmond Tutu. It's about the South African Truth Commission that worked for reconciliation after the system of apartheid was dismantled there, and the country was starting over under black majority rule. How were they to deal with the atrocities that were committed under apartheid, without getting caught in a cycle of unending hatred and revenge? Rather than choosing trials and punishments, which would drag on forever, lead to denials and self-justification, and often end without justice being done, they chose the path of truth and reconciliation. In exchange for real confessions of the truth, people would be granted amnesty, that is, they would not be punished. It wasn't a perfect process, but some people did confess. The humiliation of public confession was a kind of punishment in and of itself. But more important, the truth came out. Many people found out what had happened to their loved ones who had been tortured and killed. And people's eyes were opened to see the extent of the atrocities, and the suffering it caused on all sides.

During this process some white people said they hadn't protested against the apartheid system, because they didn't *really know* how bad things were. How could it be possible for someone who lived there *not* to know?

Not everyone lived in ignorance. Some white people did see and know, and some of them fought against the system. They were labeled trouble-makers and communists by the people in power. But many white people did turn a blind eye to the oppression and suffering of black people. First of all, people were truly separated, and they didn't have much contact with people of different races. But to really know what was going on would also undermine the whole system of white privilege, which they were benefiting from. And so on some level, they didn't want to know. Their minds were closed. They never really examined the values and assumptions that allowed this system to exist, until the whole system was turned upside down and they were forced to see and understand. Some people are still working on it.

Now in this country today, many of us white folks are realizing that our minds have been closed to the realities of life for people of color in this country. It's true that we have come a long way since the days of slavery and Jim Crow laws. But it's not true that as a country we are colorblind. There are differences between the races and there is still discrimination. It may be more subtle today, but everyone does *not* have an equal opportunity. And when people are treated poorly, or can't make it in society, it's not necessarily because they've behaved badly or there's something wrong with them.

Prejudice is still real for those who feel its results, even if it operates on an unconscious level.

Since last summer, crowds of people have been protesting and anger rising as one after another unarmed black man or boy was killed by police officers. These deaths are tragedies for everyone involved. But they have also provided an occasion to open our minds to a different reality. The fact is, many black people live in fear of being shot for no good reason by those in authority. Many black people live in fear of being arrested and imprisoned for years and years, for minor offenses that are often forgiven white people. And statistics show this fear is based in reality. People may say, "But we have a black President." Yes, but have any of our white Presidents had their citizenship or their religion questioned, or their authority undermined as some people have done to this President? Some people still can't accept this new reality, that we have a legitimate President of the United States who has dark skin. Their minds are closed. What does it take to open them?

In the gospel lesson Yukiko read this morning, the disciples' minds were closed too. It was the evening of the first day of the week, and the disciples and their friends were together. They were talking about how the women had discovered the empty tomb that morning, and that Simon Peter had gone to the tomb as well, and confirmed what they saw. With them now were the two men who had met Jesus on the road to Emmaus that same day. They had come back to tell the disciples that a stranger had walked on the road with them. They had encouraged this stranger to come and stay with them. And finally, when he took bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them, they realized who he was. It was Jesus. And then he disappeared.

While they were talking about these things, Jesus suddenly appeared among them again, and said to them, "Peace be with you." And it says they were "startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost." They had heard that other people had seen Jesus alive. But their minds couldn't quite grasp that he was there among them now. So Jesus asked for something to eat, and he ate it. And then it says he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, that the messiah was to suffer and to rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins was to be proclaimed in his name to all nations. They must have heard this before. According to the gospels, Jesus had told this to them plainly, numerous times before he died. But it didn't sink in. Their minds were not open enough to understand something so far from what they expected, or thought was even possible.

Now doubt is a likely response to a story like this. The idea that someone can die and then walk around, eat fish, and talk to people three days later is beyond the realm of our imaginations. It calls into question everything we know about the natural order of things. No one in the story believed it at first, so why should we?

It seems that in all the resurrection stories, even the gospel writers were struggling to figure out what exactly the risen body of Christ was like. They wanted us to know that this was real. But they were confused as to what that might actually mean. Luke tells us that Jesus invited the disciples to touch him and see that he had flesh and bones. He ate a piece of fish. Yet he could still walk through locked doors, disappear suddenly, and not everyone recognized him right away.

The point of all these stories is not to sort out exactly what happened to Jesus' body. The point is to open our minds to understand scripture, which is how God is

revealed to us and communicates with us. And Jesus' life, death and resurrection, and the message of forgiveness in his name, shines a light on everything God is trying to communicate to us. The resurrection is God's revelation to us of God's power, forgiveness and love.

That doesn't mean we won't have doubts. The disciples doubted. They disbelieved and wondered, but they also had a spark of joy at the same time, joy at the possibility that Jesus could still be alive in them, and that suffering and the cross was not the end, joy at the thought that God could bring life out of death, and forgiveness to people of all nations. They wanted to believe. They wanted to hope it was true. So they let Jesus open their minds.

Each generation of Christians has to let our minds be opened. We can't assume that just because our ancestors got it, that our minds will be open today. And some Christians have kept their minds closed. That's why we have a bad reputation today, especially among young people, as being prejudiced, judgmental and set in our ways. Actually, all of us are close-minded and prejudiced to some extent. But hopefully that's not the end of the story. God isn't finished with us yet. God wants to open our minds through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and lead us into life.

Susan read from 1 John this morning, "We are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this; when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is." Our minds will be opened to take it all in and we will be like Christ... not in the sense that we can appear and disappear mysteriously, or walk through locked doors. But we will see the world as God sees it, and walk in the way of Christ, not with ignorance, fear and a need to protect our own interests, but with truth and love and mercy for all.

What if we really believed this? I don't mean without any doubts, but believed it enough to let it make a difference. What if our minds were opened to really believe that nothing we have done, and nothing that has been done to us can separate us from the love of God? What if our minds were open enough to believe that God reaches out to all people with mercy, love and forgiveness? What if we really believed that everyone is created in the image of God, and that our own lives are not the only lives that matter? If we believed that God raised Jesus from the dead, and all things are possible with God, how would that change the way we think about life, and how might we live our lives differently this week?*

May God open our minds to understand the scriptures and see the world as God sees it. And may we have the courage to believe, and to walk in the world as God's children today. In Jesus' name, Amen.

* credit to David Lose at www.davidlose.net/2015/04/easter-3-b-resurrection-doubts/.