

Aha!
A Sermon for April 30, 2017
Acts 2:36-41, Luke 24:13-35
Lansdowne UMC

Have you ever had a moment when something you've been trying to understand just... clicks? I've heard of this happening to some people as they learn to read. They learn what the letters are individually, and they learn that they go together to form words. But at some point something their brain just goes "pop" and suddenly they're not processing sequences of letters anymore-- they're reading words. There's that "tip of the tongue" feeling that we've all had when you're trying to remember something. But this is different. I'm talking about those moments of insight. Those "aha" or "eureka" moments.

Something a little like this happened to me with math, actually. I didn't ever really "get" math in middle or high school. Apparently copying answers from the back of the book isn't the best plan for actually learning how to do your homework. But this actually had the potential to be quite a problem for someone like me who wanted to become an engineer, so in the summer between high school and college, I just began to focus my attention on math as I studied for a sort of placement exam. At some point in that studying, there was a "pop", the math just started to make sense. It wasn't just that I understood the thing I was studying. I was able to look back at virtually anything I'd ever been taught in math and not just be able to figure out how to do it again, but to understand how and why it worked.

The thing that fascinates me about these moments of insight is that before it's happened, you can't imagine that it's ever going to happen. But once it's happened, even amidst all of the satisfaction of the moment, you can't believe it didn't happen sooner. You almost always end up saying to yourself, "how did I not see this before?" And sometimes you can see what lead to it and sometimes you can't.

I'm not going to pretend to understand how this happens, but I have noticed that these moments of insight tend to happen to me a lot when I'm *reading the Bible*. Sometimes they're really big insights that leave me knowing I need to change something about my life. God's done that for me twice when I've read Romans chapter 6, for example. But most of the time, they're much smaller insights that just help me to understand some aspect of my faith better.

I had a few of these smaller moments of insight happen to me as I read the scripture from Acts early on this past week. You would think that insights would stop happening after a certain amount of bible reading, especially with a chapter like Acts 2, which I probably read upwards of ten times in a year. But the moments of insight don't stop. They just keep coming. They always seem so obvious from the other side.

The verses from Acts 2 that we read come from Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost. Pentecost isn't until June 4 this year, but that's where this sermon is from. Peter is explaining to the crowd the circumstances that have lead to the disciples of Jesus being filled with the Holy Spirit and enabled to speak in other languages. He tells them that's it's Jesus who has brought this about, through his crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension to God's right hand. He says to them, "this Jesus whom *you*

crucified”... “God has made ... both Lord and Messiah.” This Jesus ... whom *you* crucified!

Peter was talking to people from all over the place who had descended on Jerusalem for Pentecost, which is the Jewish “Feast of Weeks,” bringing offerings from their harvests. Now, maybe a few of them were around for Passover, but people are there from all over the known world. Certainly they weren’t *all* there when Jesus was crucified. Yet Peter says “this Jesus whom *you* crucified.” He spreads the blame very widely, because he understands that there is a collective responsibility for Jesus being put to death. It’s not just Israel that is to blame, but it’s the whole world! So that was tiny insight number 1 for: There is a lot of blame to spread around for Jesus’ death.

We know this. We know that there a sense in which we ourselves crucified Jesus by having seasons in our lives where we have turned our backs on him. And it seems that the people that Peter was preaching to on that day understood this too. They understood, at the very least, their complicity in Jesus’ crucifixion, because it says that when the people heard Peter’s words, they were “cut to the heart.” (What a great turn of phrase.) It moved them so deeply that it felt like a stabbing pain of remorse. This isn’t something manufactured by an overly guilty conscience. This is just something that the story of Jesus crucified and raised does for people. Somehow people just know that’s it’s more than just a story. Some realize that if we’re not actively “for” Jesus, then somehow, we’re on the wrong side of the issue, so to speak.

So they were cut to the heart and they asked the disciples “what should we do?” And so Peter says, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in

the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit”

Thanks for sticking with me, because here is insight number 2, which is much bigger than the first. Peter goes on to say, “This promise”-- the promise that through repentance and baptism, you will have your sins forgiven and receive the Holy Spirit-- “This promise is for *you*...”

Let’s spell it out. Peter says, “*You* crucified him...” and “this promise is for *you*.”

Isn’t that the heart of the good news? That what humanity intended for evil, God intended for good. That to those who did the worst to God-- betraying and killing his son-- God gives his best, the Holy Spirit, when they change their hearts and lives and reorient their lives to Jesus.

This is the amazing grace of God. We know that we don’t deserve God’s love. But here Peter tells the people exactly how much they don’t deserve it, “you crucified Jesus.” God would have every right to condemn these people. Yet Peter, with authority granted by God through the Holy Spirit, he says “this promise is for *you*.” The Holy Spirit, God’s love in person, is for you. For you, and for your children, and for all who are far away. And of course as I realize this I think to myself, “how could I have not seen this before?”

Then there is this story from the end of Luke’s Gospel about these two disciples walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus on that first Easter. They were talking about everything that had happened. And it says that

“While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.”

And so this conversation ensues with Jesus. Jesus says, basically, “What y’all talking about?” And Cleopas, one of the disciples, tells him about how there was this mighty prophet Jesus that ended up being condemned and crucified. He says, “we had hoped that he was the one who would redeem Israel.” In other words, we’d hoped that he’d save us from this mess we’re in, but they killed him.

Before that moment of insight happens, you can’t even imagine that it’ll ever happen. The disciples have heard that Jesus is alive from the report of the women. But they don’t know it in their own experience. It’s too far from their experience to even be something to be on the watch for. *We* know that they’re on the cusp of having one of the biggest moments of insight ever. But we also know that they just can’t see it coming.

But Jesus sticks with them, just like Jesus sticks with us when we haven’t yet come to understanding. He walks with them, and explains to them how, in fact, Jesus’ torturous death was what had to happen. He teaches them the scriptures, even though they don’t really understand them yet. But they will soon come to know the truth of what we call the Old Testament.

The disciples invite Jesus to stay with them, and he does. And it says “he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.” And it says “then their eyes were opened and they recognized him.” At last they understood.

But like me and my math insight, it wasn't just that moment that they understood, as if the breaking of the bread alone suddenly had new meaning. Everything that had been so foggy rushed in all at once into sharp focus. They have that moment, where they say, how didn't we get this before? Our hearts were on fire when he was teaching us about the scriptures.

So how did the moment of insight happen? We could say, "it was the breaking of the bread." And that's true. But more importantly, it was the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, given freely to the disciples. There was no magic to it. The stranger-Jesus looked like he was going to leave them. And so they simply said to him, "I know that you're still a stranger to me, but I'd really just love it if we could spend some time together and get to know one another better."

What I want to be able to do is to give us an antidote to doubt. We spent a lot of time talking about doubt last week. But there is no antidote to doubt. There is no formula to produce an moment of insight. Faith cannot be confined to a test tube where certain ingredients combine under certain controllable conditions to produce the same result. There are just too many variables at play. We're too complicated.

But this is what we can do. We can stay attentive to those parts of the equation that we can influence, so to speak. We don't brush the stranger Jesus off. We take the time to walk along the road to faith with him. We talk to him-- that's prayer, of course. We tell him our disappointments and our fears. We tell him our confusions and our doubts. And we listen to him as he opens the scriptures to us. And when those seasons come

when it seems like he might just be about to leave us, we beg him to stay, and he'll stay.

It's risky business to invite him in. He might not be who we think. Then again, this stranger might be more than we could possibly imagine. And maybe, just maybe, he'll reveal himself to us. And we'll say, "Aha!" How did it miss it before? You were here all along.