

Understanding the Scriptures (Lk. 24:36b-48)

Nobody wants to hear a history lesson at 9 am on a Sunday morning, but I have one for you anyway!

One of the proudest moments in the history of the Anglican Church is when our ancestor William Tyndale came out with the very first translation of the Bible into English.

Before that, you had to read Latin, Greek or Hebrew to read the scriptures for yourself.

If you didn't, and most folks didn't, you relied on what the church told you was in there.

So Tyndale is not only our hero, he's the hero of every person who today reads the Bible in their native tongue: Tongan, Chuukese, Mandarin, Ilocano....you get the idea.

But opening up the Bible to every Tom, Dick and Harry also has its challenges.

People read all kinds of crazy things into the Bible, and then go and act on them because, well, it's in the Bible!

Slavery and the second class status of women and people who are completely sure the last days will happen next Wednesday at noon are all rooted in ordinary folks reading the Bible.

Those folks at Westboro Baptist Church who picket the funerals of soldiers and gay people with signs announcing God's wrath do what they do because that's how they read the Bible.

Wars and genocide and creating classes of the saved and the damned, of insiders and outsiders, often have true believers pointing to this or that Bible passage to justify what is in fact only disgusting behavior.

So how we are to read and interpret and understand the Bible has huge consequences, not only for our personal lives, but for the life of the world as well.

Now, I say all of that to you because this morning Jesus says something to us about exactly this issue.

“Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures.....”

Meaning, I think, you can't just open the Bible and start reading and think you know what's going on.

To get what's going on requires that our minds, like the disciples' minds, be opened.

And perhaps what Jesus says to them this morning, what he says to us this morning, perhaps it is something like this.

The Bible is not dictation from God.

The Bible is not even one book.

It's a collection of over 60 books, written over more than a 1000 years, in different cultures, in different circumstances, with both men and women having their say, because what it is at its root is not a rule book for living or an Instruction Guide from the Almighty – it is instead the record of a very long conversation between humanity and God.

Sometimes humanity speaks and sometimes God speaks.

One fellow likens it to two vines wrapped around each other, one vine being the voice of humanity, the other the voice of God.

The vines are intertwined, but they are always separate, always distinct.

How do we sort out which is which?

That's the key that Jesus gives us this morning.

Folks then are not much different from folks now.

Then, the zealots insisted that God's word required armed resistance against the Roman occupiers.

During the Iraq war, the Pentagon delivered various scripture passages to President Bush that urged the justness of that war.

We see similar use of another holy book by groups like ISIS that use the Koran to justify all sorts of horror and evil.

We Christians for centuries used scripture to demonize and ghettoize our Jewish sisters and brothers.

So how we read and understand scripture has enormous consequences, and that's where Jesus steps in to help us this morning.

I don't know if you've ever had your eyes examined when the doctor puts those funny glasses on your face and suddenly some colors zoom out while everything else fades into the background.

Or if you've been to a 3D movie where some stuff just charges out at you while everything else stays in the background,

When it comes to understanding the Bible, Jesus is the funny glasses.

Jesus helps us figure out when we are reading passages that reflect the voice of humanity and when they reflect the word of God, precisely because "the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day."

Meaning, that the true nature of God is found in suffering, surrender, and even death — but death does not have the last word.

Meaning that when we read scripture that seems to support violence or rejection or power or wealth or might, we can know, because of Jesus, those passages are part of humanity's conversation with God, they are the vine of humanity running throughout the Bible.

Because, truth be told, we are in love with violence and rejection and power and might.

But the voice of God, God's vine in this long conversation with us, is always and everywhere found in those passages that speak of compassion and forgiveness and kindness and gentleness and a willingness even to die – but death does not have the last word.

Maybe that's the insight that Jesus gives to his friends this morning – that the way of God is marked by love of enemies and turning the other cheek and forgiveness and even a willingness to die if need be – because death does not have the last word.

Just last week on the mainland, there was a preacher urging his people to bring their hand guns to church, because a church had been robbed, and, I quote: "We need to protect ourselves."

We go to war and we buy handguns and we fortify our lives and the lives of those we love because we are so scared of death, of loss, of change.

But maybe what Jesus is assuring us of this morning, as he stands there in his normal clothes, having a normal conversation with his friends, having a bite to eat, is that death and loss and change are not to be feared any longer.

That because of Jesus, death and loss and change have all been made into something new, something even beautiful, something even amazing.

Jesus greets his friends this morning not in some blast of blinding light, but as himself, as they knew him.

Scars and all.

He eats some fish.

He stands with them and talks.

The holy and the divine are now one with the ordinary and the profane.

Because that thing that we call death, that motivator of wars and torture and hate and fear, it is defeated.

“Whatever death is, it need not control our lives anymore, because, in Jesus, it becomes nothing more than an empty suit, a bark without a bite.

None of us has any reason to fear being dead, something which will certainly happen to all of us, since death cannot separate us, ever, from the real source of life. J. Alison, Raising Abel, 33, paraphrased.

That’s what the author of the letter to the Hebrews tells us:

“Since we are made of flesh and blood, it makes sense that the Savior took on flesh and blood in order to rescue us by his death.

By embracing death, taking it into himself, he destroys the Devil’s power over death and frees all who muddle through life, scared to death of death.” (Heb. 2:14-15)

So when we go and open the Bible, let us seek and find the conversation that God is having with us, “the vine which is the true vine, the vine that carries nothing but forgiveness, grace, love and life.

Its grapes are sweet and nurture the soul, making us all one community.

This vine is there from the very beginning.

It announces with joy the true character of God—a character that Jesus knows; and lives, dies and rises again to show us.” (paraphrased, source lost)

The God of absolute compassion, who refuses violence of all kinds, is revealed through the funny glasses of Jesus.

+amen

