

Message: Open to Christ

What did it feel like the last time you had an “ah, ha” moment?

Think about it. “Ah ha” moments can be great, big, life-changing things, like the realization you want to marry a certain special someone. An “ah ha” moment can also be as simple as remembering the name of that song that’s been playing in your head for the past three hours.

“Ah ha” moments are those instants when we have a breakthrough.

They’re a sudden realization or insight we didn’t have before; something inside us changes. Students experience them often when they’re doing homework. Coaches help teams and individuals have “ah ha” moments. It’s part of the learning process, when we grow. You don’t have to be smart or have money or be from any particular family or of a certain gender or even have spiritual beliefs to have an “ah ha” moment. It’s a uniquely human gift from God.

Our Scripture passage for today is powerful for many reasons.

We get a glimpse of the nature of our resurrected bodies. God reveals Jesus as our resurrected Savior, showing us a being who is fully spirit and fully human. Luke narrates the disciple’s encounter with the risen Jesus. We find another version of the great commission (see Matthew 28:17-20, Acts 1:6-8).

I want to focus on the “ah ha” moments and what they mean.

There are two parts. The first is the disciples’ experience of the Messiah. The second is the task Jesus gave them. Let’s begin with what was revealed. To do so, it helps to take a look at what was happening.

It’s the third day, Sunday. Jesus was crucified and buried before sunset on Friday. The disciples are in shock. They’re grieving, confused and don’t know where to turn. Some of the women went to visit the tomb in the morning and came back with crazy stories that no one believes.

Two disciples decide they’ve had enough. Cleopas and his friend hit the road. They head down the hill to Emmaus. As they walk, they’re having a heated discussion about what happened, their disappointment. A stranger joins them on the road and asks, “What’s going on?” They’re surprised the stranger hasn’t heard, but fill him in on what happened

over the past week, their discouragement. What they don't realize is that the stranger is Jesus, risen from the dead.

Jesus knew they didn't believe. He's walking with them and yet they can't get past their limitations to truly see him, even though he's changed. He says, “*You're foolish! Your mind won't let you accept what scripture tells you. Don't you know Christ had to suffer and then enter into glory?*” (Luke 24:25-26). Then he interpreted Scripture for them so they'd understand.

It must have been an awesome lesson. It kept them engaged for the 7-8 miles they traveled. For those who keep track, that would be 16,000+ steps. They stopped early for the night and invited the wise stranger to stay and eat with them. Even with new knowledge filling them, they still didn't get who the stranger was.

So Jesus took action. He sat with them at the table. Then Jesus re-enacted the last supper, breaking bread, blessing it and giving it to them. He revealed himself.

The two had their “ah ha” moment. Luke tells us “*their eyes were [fully] opened and they recognized him*” (v31). Then an amazing thing happens: Jesus disappears! Just in case they need proof, he gave it. The two turned to each other and said “[*my heart's been*] *on fire this whole time*” (v32). So much so, they jumped up from their meal and ran 8 miles back up the hill to Jerusalem! The two of them rushed in to the disciples, interrupting their dinner. They shared what they experienced with the eleven. Today's reading continues from there....

While they were telling the story, Jesus appears. John's gospel tells us the group was behind closed doors. They were afraid. Let me ask, how would you react if you were interrupted during a quiet dinner at home after the funeral of your best friend, only to have that friend appear at the table? The disciples were startled and terrified. They weren't sure if they were seeing a ghost or hallucinating or what.

Why is Jesus' appearance important? He's revealing himself in resurrected form. Jesus wants them to know he's real. He knows there will be those who deny, those who lie, those who try to discredit or distract us from the truth of what happened. Jesus died on the cross.

Three days later, he rose from the dead, just as he told us he would. Jesus proves who he is. Jesus shows them the marks on his body. They touch him. Jesus eats a piece of fish. He’s really there; nothing has been faked or imagined.

What’s their response? It’s complex. They’re confused and joyful at the same time. How could he die and yet be alive? You know the expression, “it’s too good to be true.” That’s how they feel. What’s happening is so far outside of the box they don’t know how to make sense of it. Have you ever felt that way?

That’s when the second “ah ha” moment occurs. Jesus “[fully] opened their minds to understand the scriptures” (v45). He reveals to them what was in plain sight all along. Jesus is the Messiah. He came to fulfill God’s promise to save us. God entered into the world and changed it forever. Jesus is the proof. He shows them how God revealed what was to come through God’s inspired Word.

What do the “ah ha” moments mean? Here’s two aspects: Jesus opened the eyes of the two on the road and opened the minds of those gathered for dinner that first night. It’s not that they couldn’t see or wouldn’t reason. They didn’t recognize fully what they were seeing and they didn’t have the full insight or realization about why Jesus was God’s way of saving humanity. I believe the “ah ha” was experienced wholly and completely. Their heart, mind, body and spirit radically changed in an instant. There was no holding back from this point. They would gladly suffer and die because they really, truly believed. They are “all in.”

Have you had an “ah ha” moment with Jesus? While we can’t experience the risen Christ in body, we can experience Jesus through the eye witness accounts we read in the gospels. Those testimonies and others’ experiences of Jesus have been passed down to us. When we gather to share our experiences of God, we’re given evidence. Miracles still happen to the amazement of scientists and philosophers. People encounter Jesus through God’s Word. When we pray to receive Jesus as our Savior, we experience God. We share that.

Whatever it may be, each of us has the opportunity to be changed, wholly and completely, in an instant. Jesus is waiting. Let the Holy Spirit move you. Trust God.

The second part, what follows the “ah ha” moment, is important. We’re changed, but we’re changed so we can follow Jesus for a reason. Jesus gives us a task. Disciples are witnesses. They have seen, heard, touched and experienced Jesus’ presence. That’s important. The idea of giving witness is comparable to testifying in court. When put to question while under oath, a disciple can give a clear, authentic statement of why they believe. They can tell someone about their “ah ha” moment. They know Jesus rose from the dead. Any jury of peers would hear it as truth. That gives us confidence.

Jesus said, “You are my witnesses” (v48). That’s our task. The Greek word for witnesses is “martyres” (μάρτυρες). It’s the root for the word martyr. That has implications for what it means to follow Jesus. The Greek tells us a witness is a person of strong, ethical character, who shares what they experienced. That’s what it means to be a good witness.

That’s powerful. Discerning fact from fiction is important. It was then and it is today as well. If relationships aren’t based on truthful promises, what reason do people have to trust? That’s why so many people are concerned about fake news, privacy and how to make sense of what we see and hear online and on TV.

God is way ahead of us. Jesus revealed himself not because it was necessary for his resurrection or ascension. Jesus revealed himself so that we’d have eye witness testimony to rely on. That eye witness testimony was written down and has been passed on to us, orally and as the inspired Word of God, ever since. We can trust God’s Word.

The word martyr has implications for our life. Suffering is part of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Paul wrote, “*God’s Spirit bears witness that we are ... joint heirs with Christ – if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him*” (Romans 8:16-17, NRSV). Jesus suffered hardship all his life, most harshly on the day of his crucifixion. Jesus didn’t suffer for the sake of suffering. He did it to

honor God. God raised Jesus and gave him glory and power, as the first of all who will be resurrected.

Following Jesus isn't a path to easy street. There are no promises of a comfortable, easy life. In fact, the Bible reflects our experience of life. People suffer. People take advantage of others. People do violence to one another. People are marginalized. Some people are strangers. We get illness and suffer from diseases and disabilities.

Jesus offers us life in our suffering. Without him, we're left on our own to cope. Based on my 25 years outside the church, I can tell you that it's a very lonely, empty way to live. There's no basis for hope. We're left on our own to struggle with the challenges of life. Frankly, we're not up to it. That's why people turn to drugs, sex, alcohol - name your panacea.

We're called to share our experience of God, the real life we have, no matter what our circumstance is. The power of our “ah ha” moment changes us. We're connected to Jesus. Nothing can break that relationship or live up to it. It's so important and meaningful it takes priority over everything else in our life. That means we have hope even when our heart is breaking. We have peace even when the world is collapsing. We have faith even when we're suffering. We're assured of God's love even when others doubt. In all of it, we know God's grace. And that's enough.

Jesus gives life. When we accept him, we discover what real hope is. We learn that it's not about us. God loved us first. God's love is so deep and strong that Jesus came for us. He's our savior. And Jesus is coming back for us. That's something real that we can hold on to. It's good news we can confidently share with anyone.

When was the last time you were really, truly open to Christ?

Open your heart, mind, eyes and spirit to Jesus and be changed. You'll discover a life worth living.

Luke 24:36b-48 (CEB)

While they were saying these things, Jesus himself stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” They were terrified and afraid. They thought they were seeing a ghost.

He said to them, “Why are you startled? Why are doubts arising in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet. It’s really me! Touch me and see, for a ghost doesn’t have flesh and bones like you see I have.” As he said this, he showed them his hands and feet. Because they were wondering and questioning in the midst of their happiness, he said to them, “Do you have anything to eat?” They gave him a piece of baked fish. Taking it, he ate it in front of them.

Jesus said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you - that everything written about me in the Law from Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures. He said to them, “This is what is written: the Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and a change of heart and life for the forgiveness of sins must be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.

1 John 3:1-7 (CEB)

See what kind of love the Father has given to us in that we should be called God’s children, and that is what we are! Because the world didn’t recognize him, it doesn’t recognize us.

Dear friends, now we are God’s children, and it hasn’t yet appeared what we will be. We know that when he appears we will be like him because we’ll see him as he is. And everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself even as he is pure. Every person who practices sin commits an act of rebellion, and sin is rebellion. You know that he appeared to take away sins, and there is no sin in him. Every person who remains in relationship to him does not sin. Any person who sins has not seen him or known him.

Little children, make sure no one deceives you. The person who practices righteousness is righteous, in the same way that Jesus is righteous.