

“But We Had Hoped”

Luke 24:13-35

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter

April 19, 2026

Westminster, Greenville

Ben Dorr

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When Jesse Jackson died earlier this spring, one of the items that showed up on my social media was a clip of the Rev. Jackson on Sesame Street back in 1972, when he was 31 years old.

Did anyone else here catch that clip?

This was just a bit before my Sesame Street watching days.

I don't recall ever seeing the episode as a child.

But I sure enjoyed watching that segment of the show a couple of months ago.

Jackson has a group of kids gathered.

And they're supposed to repeat what he says.

He says: I am...

They say: I am...

He says: somebody.

They say: somebody.

I may be poor...but I am...somebody.

I may be young...but I am...somebody.<sup>1</sup>

It's a call and response, but what I think is so effective is that it acts, in many ways, like a refrain. Something that gets repeated, over and over again.

Something that you return to.

Something that sticks with you.

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<sup>1</sup> The clip can be found on YouTube.

Feel free to google that Sesame Street clip after worship if you want, but right now, I'd like you to think about refrains.

Have you ever considered the power of a refrain?

It happens in music all the time.

If I mention some of the hymns in our hymnbook, I'll bet many of you will remember the refrain. In fact, let's try it out. Todd, would you mind playing a refrain or two from our hymnal...and the rest of you can see if you remember which hymn this is:

[Todd plays]

"Great is Thy Faithfulness..."

Did you get it right?

Let's try another.

[Todd plays]

What was that?

"Here I Am, Lord..."

Good, good.

Now the reason I mention refrains is that you don't just find them in music. You also find them in scripture. The Gospel writer Luke was a master with a refrain.

In our text for today, when the risen Jesus comes alongside the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, do the disciples know that it was Jesus?

No.

Luke writes:

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

And just to make sure his readers get the point, Luke tells us that Cleopas, one of the two disciples, says to this supposed stranger:

“Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?”

“What things?”

“The things about Jesus of Nazareth...how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.”

He’s saying all this to Jesus!

In other words, even though it’s Easter afternoon, and even though these two disciples have already heard the good news of Easter from the women who went to the tomb that morning, they still cannot see what God wants them to see.

Their eyes are closed.  
Their minds are closed.  
Their hearts are closed.

That’s how the road to Emmaus begins.  
And how does it end?

“When he was at table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened,” Luke writes, “and they recognized him...”

I hope you heard that movement.



they somehow have made it so that whenever I open the door and look for something, it's not there.

And when my wife comes over and points it out to me, it just magically shows up!

One day, I'm going to figure out how they do it...

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Of course, finding the ketchup is one thing.

But opening our minds and hearts to what God is up to in our own lives and in the life of the world...that can be another thing entirely.

The Presbyterian pastor Tom Are tells of meeting with a young woman who was preparing for her wedding. This young woman was excited, and during the premarital counseling, Tom asked what he thought was an innocent question:

"Will your father be walking you down the aisle?"  
The young woman started to cry.

"I'm sorry," she said. "My father won't be at the wedding."

"Oh my," Tom exclaimed. "Why not?"

"Well," she replied, "he wasn't at my sixteenth birthday party. He said he would be at [my] graduation but evidently something else came up. When I had surgery on my back, he wasn't there."

"The truth is he hasn't been part of my life for twelve years now.  
"He won't be at the wedding."

“Have you asked him?” Tom inquired.

“No,” she replied, “I know what he will say.”

Then she said, “If I have learned anything, it is that I can’t fix this.”<sup>2</sup>

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I think that young woman knew what all of us know:  
Some things in life RESIST getting open.

Do you have anything like that in your life right now?  
Something you can’t fix?

Perhaps it’s with an aging parent.  
Or a challenging child.  
Or your future that seems to have fallen flat.

Something in your life is closed,  
and as hard as you try, as much as you pray,  
you just cannot open it?

This is why we need to hear Luke’s refrain.

According to Luke, Easter is about the risen Christ, alive and at work in our lives, taking what’s closed and opening our lives in a way we could never foresee...

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<sup>2</sup> The Reverend Tom Are, “There Is No Stopping This,” Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, IL, April 13, 2025.

It's a refrain that Luke works over and over again in the book of Acts. Do you remember what Jesus says to the disciples before he ascends to heaven?

“...and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Do you hear the movement?

More and more people becoming OPEN to what God has done in Jesus Christ?

Or how about Lydia, in Acts 16, when Luke writes:

“The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul.”

Speaking of Paul, he's a perfect example.

Chapter 9.

Damascus Road.

Paul, who at that time was Saul, is “breathing threats and murder against” God's church.

But then the risen Christ came to him.

And the risen Christ spoke to him.

And “though his eyes were open, he could see nothing...”

So God sends Ananias to Saul, and Ananias says, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”

And immediately *something like scales fell from his eyes...*

In other words, Paul didn't open his own eyes.

It was the hand of God.

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I hope you remember that part too.  
Getting open happens only by God's grace.  
Getting open isn't something we do on our own.  
It's something God does through us.  
It's a miracle of God.

Consider our church's vision.  
What's our vision?  
Open minds open hearts.

One of the reasons this vision means so much to me is that it's an EASTER vision.

That vision is why we've spent the spring engaged in a capital campaign feasibility study. So that hopefully, God will open OUR eyes to the ways in which we might be faithful for future generations here at Westminster. So that our eyes won't just be focused on "what's in it for me, right now" at Westminster.

As a couple of our elders put it at the Session retreat, the possibility of a capital campaign means planting trees whose shade is intended not for us, but for future generations at Westminster.

We need to be open to God's activity in our church's future.

And...we need to be open to that activity in our church's present.

For example, just a couple of weeks ago, we learned that DSS in South Carolina paused accepting applications for its Child Care Scholarship Program. This has a direct impact on our neighbors at Pleasant Valley Connection, and many parents there are feeling CAUGHT, between childcare for their child and keeping their job.

So just last Sunday, I was very pleased to hear that our Witness & Service Committee approved an immediate \$12,000 to go to Pleasant Valley Connection to help bridge the gap caused by the absence of those scholarships, so that parents can keep sending their children to Pleasant Valley Connection's childcare during this summer.

And what we need to pray for is that God will keep opening our eyes for new ways that we can be good neighbors to our friends at Pleasant Valley.

And that God will open new avenues for Westminster's future, that none of us can see clearly right now.

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You see, according to Luke, the refrain of Easter is OPEN.

Open minds. Open hearts.  
Open hands. Open church.  
Open wallets. Open doors.

The risen Christ, opening the parts of our lives that we think are closed forever...

Getting back to the young woman about to get married...the day of her wedding finally arrived.

And she was crying again.

She was crying because standing at the other end of that sanctuary aisle was the man whom she would promise to love, and who would promise to love her...in plenty and want, in joy and sorrow, in sickness and in health.

But she was also crying because standing next to her was the very person whom she never expected to be there, her father.

For the first time in a long time, he was there for her.  
And he was ready to walk her down the aisle.

Reflecting on that wedding, Tom Are writes:

“I was glad he chose to come, but I was more impressed by her. She could have let her disappointment control her. She could have let her injury define all that could be, because neither of them could fix all that had gone wrong. But she risked [relationship with him] one more time.

“And he was there. I wish I could [say] that all was well after that, but [we all] know these matters are more complex than that...

[And yet, on her wedding day, for the briefest of minutes] “it was a moment of grace, a glimpse of a better day.”<sup>3</sup>

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The late writer Fred Buechner once put it like this:

Whenever our “eyes open, we...catch glimpses of a New Creation, which, fleeting as those glimpses are...give us hope for this life and for whatever life may await us later on.”<sup>4</sup>

Of course, it’s easy to forget about those glimpses.  
It’s easy to get other refrains STUCK in our heads.

Maybe you have one in your head right now.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Now & Then*, New York: HarperCollins, 1983.

Maybe the refrain is:  
My life is a mess. It's never going to change.

Or maybe your refrain is:  
I am who I am. Why do I need to change?

Or maybe your refrain is:  
How did I make that mistake?  
My past will always define who I am...

If you have anything like that going through your mind and heart right now, may I invite you to remember Luke's Easter refrain?

Luke's Easter refrain is...OPEN!

And even if God does NOT do what you desperately want for God to do, God promises to open something else...something you cannot predict, or plan, or foresee.

Because that's what happened after that first Easter long ago.  
The risen Christ...

Opened the eyes of his disciples.  
Opened the mind of his greatest enemy.  
Opened the doors of the early church,  
so that Ethiopian eunuchs and Roman soldiers  
and people who had spent their entire lives  
on the bottom rung of Roman society...  
ALL would be welcome in God's church!

Now, if the risen Christ can do all that with the early church, what do you think he can do with this church?

What do you think the risen Christ will do...to OPEN YOU??

(Amen.)