

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas - April 26, 2020
“Their Eyes Were Opened”
Acts 2:14a, 36-41 and Luke 24:13-35

Earlier this week, I awakened to the now familiar sounds of our new puppy. She was yipping to let me know that she wanted to be released from her crate. With two children and two dogs at home, I am often on the move by 5 a.m. And that morning, after taking her out, I returned to my living room where I sat in darkness illumined by a table lamp.

I bowed my head, closed my eyes, and began to pray. Then, just as I was centering my thoughts, I was distracted by a loud chorus of birds welcoming the dawn of a new day. It’s amazing, isn’t it, what you can hear when you are actually listening? I know that I am not alone in my gratitude for the birds, taking up residence in our neighborhoods this spring.

That’s why so many of us choose to encourage them. I do this by setting up two backyard feeders where we can watch them from our windows. And I marvel at how dependent we all remain upon the bounty that the earth provides.

There are some, as you know, who dedicate their lives to studying other creatures. One researcher named Karl Berg observed 57 species of songbirds at first

light in the dense forests of Ecuador. His team noted that the birds began singing at different times, and that two factors determined when the birds would first vocalize. The first was their foraging height in the canopy. And the second was the size of their eyes. Those at the top of the canopy and those with the largest eyes were the first to sing because they were the ones to first perceive the light.¹

It's easy to understand why. Leaves and branches shade out lower levels of the forest, making the forest floor slower to brighten than the canopy. Meanwhile, even at the same height, different eye sizes perceive light levels differently. This is the case because larger eyes gather more light than smaller ones. In the end, it's a matter of perception. Perceiving that first light does not occur simultaneously but, rather, varies among individuals.

For me, this serves as a reminder for us to be patient with one another. Not all possess the same gifts, the same abilities, the same insights. It's also why we ought to be kind to ourselves. Because we don't all perceive the world in the same way. When someone else has a great idea, we wonder why we did not think of it first. And yet, because we all benefit from the collective knowledge of the group, the

¹ Jameison, Barrie Gillean Molyneux, ed., *Reproductive Biology and Phylogeny of Birds: Sexual Selection, behavior, conversation, embryology, genetics* (Part B of *Reproductive Biology and Phylogeny of Birds*) (Science Publishers, Enfield, New Hampshire, 2007), 183.

perceptions of others weave together with our perceptions until more and more light is made known.

Amid the daily presence and threat of COVID-19, we find ourselves navigating in the darkness. Across the world, infectious disease specialists have their eyes trained on the signs of first light. The goal is that we might emerge from the shadows of this moment into the marvelous light. But we aren't there yet. The mood is still heavy as, in places near and far, traumatized citizens venture out of their homes, tentatively searching for rays of hope.

It's reminiscent of the aftermath of Jesus' crucifixion and burial when his disciples were so heavy laden. They were scared. Traumatized. Confused. Searching for answers. According to Luke's Gospel, a group of women including Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of James, arrived with spices on Easter morning at the place where he had been laid to rest.

It was early dawn. And in those moments of first light, the women found the stone rolled away from the tomb. But when they went in, they did not find the body. It was then that the news of Jesus' resurrection was revealed to them. It was then

that they stepped into the presence of that first light. And it was they who would serve as the first witnesses of the resurrection for the rest of the disciples.

Like the birds of the dawn chorus, high above the forest canopy, their eyes were opened. And having perceived the reality of this new day, they would soon open their mouths in praise of the Almighty. For this good news was not theirs alone, but was intended for all the earth. Now was their time to testify to the light.

As many of us have learned, it's not always easy to testify to the light. We know that many kinds of darkness feel even more threatening than nightfall. It descends upon us in waves of anxiety or depression. It disrupts our sleep, and we wonder if it will ever end. Suddenly, our thoughts and movements become more labored. The future seems less certain. It beckons us to secure tomorrow for ourselves rather than waiting for God to deliver us.

This is the kind of darkness that accompanied the women at the empty tomb. And this is the kind of darkness that journeyed with the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Traveling in the light of day and yet still shrouded in darkness, they were reeling from the trauma of his crucifixion. With their leader now dead and laid in the tomb, it seemed that the Jesus movement had ended. There was nothing left for them

to do but return to their homes. So they journeyed seven miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus, talking with someone that they believed to be a stranger along the way.

Writing about “the human capacity for doubt and mistrust,” Ruben Rodriguez notes that “when Jesus walked alongside the two travelers on the road to Emmaus, they were kept from recognizing him. Sadly, despite everything that Jesus had said and done to prepare the disciples for his death and resurrection, their doubts undermined their trust in him as the promised Messiah.”² In the midst of their conversation with him, they even say, “we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.”

Now, they are regrouping. Starting over. Moving on. Even so, Jesus does not abandon them. He draws near. He walks with them. He asks them questions. He explains the scriptures. He joins them for a meal. And in the presence of his light, their eyes are opened. Their perspectives are changed. Their mission is clarified.

At dawn that morning, I imagine the voices of the women singing, “Glory to God in the highest.” And, in due time, I envision all of the earth perceiving the sun

² Ruben Rosario Rodriguez, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year A, Volume 2*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 239.

at its rising. For the light shines in the darkness and the darkness shall not overcome it. Friends, may it be so and all thanks be to God. Amen.