

Mr. Smith went to a lawyer and said *“I want a divorce!”* *“Ok,”* the lawyer said, *“Do you have grounds?”* *“I do,”* Mr. Smith said, *“I have a house in Levittown, and a cabin in the Poconos.”* *“That’s not what I mean,”* the lawyer said, *“do you have a grudge?”* *“No, just a carport,”* the man said. *“You don’t understand,”* the lawyer said, *“Does your wife beat you up?”* *“No,”* the man said, *“she’s a late riser and I’m an early bird.”* Exasperated, the lawyer asked *“Why do you want a divorce?”* *“Because,”* the man said, *“my wife can’t carry on a normal conversation.”*

The disciples had a similar problem. As they followed Jesus around Israel, He told them that *“everything written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. He will be handed over to the Gentiles; He will be mocked and insulted and spat upon. [And] after they have flogged him, they will kill him, and on the third day He will rise again.”* But when they found the tomb empty just a short time later, they were nevertheless confused. And it wasn’t just the 12 who would later be called apostles that were confused. As we see in the passage from Luke, many of the followers of Jesus didn’t understand what was happening.

Which in the case of the resurrection story here in Luke’s gospel is really astonishing. That is because Luke tells us that one of the disciples on the road that day was named Cleopas. In his gospel, John identifies Cleopas as the husband of someone named Mary, and also explains that this particular Mary was the cousin of Jesus’ mother. Which means that Cleopas was a relative of Jesus! So Jesus was not walking with mere strangers. And he wasn’t walking with just fringe disciples who didn’t make it into the elite group of 12. At least one of these men was family! And Cleopas, of all people, should have recognized Jesus. But he did not.

To some extent that spiritual blindness has continued for the last 2,000 years. For as we saw in the video, too many modern day Christians think of Easter just as an *“isolated event”* that enables us to go to heaven one day, and not as *“part of the continuing story of our salvation.”* Which is unfortunate because Easter doesn’t just celebrate something Jesus did to change where we will spend eternity. Easter is also an invitation to let Jesus raise us to new levels of life in Him in this life. That is because the ultimate goal of salvation is to change us back into the beings we were created to be, and that spiritual transformation (while ending one day in heaven) has to begin here in this life. To see that, however, we need to look closely at what Luke wrote.

Luke wrote, for instance, that on the afternoon of the day Mary said she saw the risen Lord, two of the larger group of disciples were traveling from Jerusalem to Emmaus. Luke wrote that as they walked, a stranger joined them. And Luke wrote that as people curiously do in the presence of strangers, they continued speaking loud enough for him to hear them. So Luke wrote that the stranger naturally asked what they were talking about. And he wrote that in response, one of the two said something like *“what planet are you from?”* for he couldn’t fathom how anyone could be in Jerusalem and be unaware of what had recently happened. Nevertheless, Luke tells us they explained what happened. He tells us they told the stranger that Mary had claimed to have seen the Lord alive that morning. And he tells us the stranger chastised them for their lack of understanding, and laid out for them what the scriptures said about how the Messiah’s death was not the end of the story but the beginning of a new story. And then, finally, Luke tells us that as they began their

evening meal, *“their eyes were opened.”*

Their experience was in some ways like a farmer who was always complaining about his farm. One day, he decided to sell it and buy a better one. So he went to a real estate agent and had his property listed. A few days later, he went back to peruse other properties, and quickly fell in love with one. It had an ideal location. It had new equipment. And it had good stock, fertile ground, and plenty of water. *“That’s the farm I want!”* he said, *“It’s the property I’ve dreamed about!”* *“I don’t know how to tell you this,”* the agent replied after looking at the listing card, *“but if you look at the back of the listing, you’ll see it’s the farm you already own.”*

Just like the two disciples, he was unable to see what was right in front of him. And just as that farmer was confronted with something that opened his eyes, so the disciples were confronted with something that *“opened their eyes.”* But what opened the eyes of the disciples is curious. According to Luke it was when Jesus *“took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them.”* Now at first, that may sound like communion language, as if Luke is implying that they - and we - find God in the communion. Which is true. Through communion God can become more real to us. But Luke is actually pointing to much more than that.

Luke wanted his readers (then and now) to understand that the presence of Jesus in our lives is best seen when we participate in the life giving, and life sustaining entity that is Jesus’ mission outpost on earth: the Church! That is because salvation (and the spiritual transformation God intends it to bring about) is not magically doled out - even through the sacraments. Instead, it occurs by the active and ongoing practice of *“working out”* our salvation in numerous religious practices IN the faith community called “the Body of Christ.” Which is why Jesus also told the disciples that *“where two or three have gathered in my name, there I am in their midst.”*

We see this when we remember that Jesus was not serving communion elements when the two disciples recognized Him, but dinner rolls! Nor was He officiating at a sacrament in a worship service when *“their eyes were opened.”* He was sharing a meal with them in a home. As the early church sought to explain how we “see” God to new converts, they therefore did so by telling them that the things Jesus tells us to do to commune with Him (and be transformed spiritually through that communing) can be divided into two main spiritual development practices. The first they called Acts of Piety. And the second they called Acts of Mercy.

Acts of Piety are things we do to hear God speak to us, guide us, and teach us. Acts of Piety are things like having devotions, worshiping God, studying the Bible, meditating, fasting, and praying. Acts of Mercy are things we do to share with others the blessings God has given us. Acts of Mercy are things like feeding the hungry, supplying clothing to the needy, caring for those who are sick or in prison, counseling the bereaved and troubled, and meeting whatever needs present themselves in the lives of those around us. Not that Acts of Piety or Acts of Mercy save us. We are saved, as the Apostle Paul wrote, *“by grace through faith.”*

But as Paul explained, Acts of Piety and Acts of Mercy help us “*work out our salvation.*” For our salvation must be “*worked out!*” That is because we do not become loving automatically. Nor do we accidentally develop into righteous people. It takes the grace of our Heavenly Father, through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit when we respond in faith through Acts of Piety and Acts of Mercy, for us to be remolded back into the image of our Lord. We see this in that after Paul told the Ephesians we are saved by grace through faith, he went on to say “*for we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared before the world began that we should walk in them.*” And then concluded by saying “*Therefore... I entreat you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called.*”

The success of the followers of Jesus in being spiritually transformed through Acts of Piety and Acts of Mercy can be seen in the history of the early Church as recorded in the book of Acts and in the history of the Wesleyan revival in the 17th and 18th century in England. As recorded in Acts, for instance, the first followers of Jesus participated in Acts of Piety and Acts of Mercy, and God so transformed them that on the Day of Pentecost 3,000 new believers joined them because of their witness, and in the days that followed God continued each day to “*add to their fellowship those who were being saved.*” In the Wesleyan revival in the 17th and 18th century in England,, the followers of Jesus participated in Acts of Piety and Acts of Mercy, and God so transformed them that through their witness English society was in many ways changed - so much so that in 1928, Anglican Archbishop Davidson wrote that they “*practically changed the outlook and even the character of the English nation.*”

We see why in the video we watched. For despite her confusion about Jesus and Easter, the first woman did have one accurate insight when she said “*maybe we shouldn't think of Easter as an isolated event, and instead think of it as a part of the continuing story about our salvation.*” Which is why Easter in the worship calendar the ancient Church developed, Easter is not just a single day, but an entire season where we look at what it means to let God raise us up to new levels of life in Him.

Unfortunately, instead of living like the two disciples did in being spiritually transformed by allowing God to “*open their eyes*” to the presence of Jesus with them at their dinner table, or what our Methodist ancestors did in 18th century England to let God transform them spiritually by opening their eyes to His presence in their lives through Acts of Piety and Acts of Mercy, all too often we modern Methodists are like the man who saw a friend on the beach with his dog. “*Watch this!*” the friend said. He then tossed a stick into the ocean, and ordered the dog to get it. The dog promptly ran out to where the stick was, and back, on TOP of the water! But the man was unmoved by that miraculous sight, and merely groused “*Your dog can't swim, can he?*”

In a similar way, we modern Christians can see the things in front of us that Jesus wants to use to help us see His presence in our lives, but we can refuse to respond to what is right before us. For what is right before us is the fact that “*we shouldn't think of Easter as an isolated event, and instead [ought to] think of it as a part of the continuing story about our salvation*” by participating in Acts of Piety and Acts of Mercy. Luke tells us in Acts that the early disciples did this by devoting

“themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” And in the written history of the early Methodists, we are told that the followers of Wesley did this by not only going to worship on Sunday, but also by joining others in spiritual growth groups that Wesley called “Class Meetings.”

I therefore invite you to follow the example of those first followers of Jesus and the example of the first Methodists by making the commitment to join a spiritual growth group to help you participate faithfully in Acts of Piety and Acts of Mercy. One way to do that is through something modern Methodists call “Covenant Discipleship Groups.”

An explanation of what a “Covenant Discipleship Group” does has been given to you with this week’s announcements. Read what it says about how such a group can help you grow spiritually through Acts of Piety and Acts of Mercy. Then join us on Wednesday night. First for our next Fellowship Activity Night Dinner. And then for a short time to talk about forming several “Covenant Discipleship Groups” here at our church so we can continue to have our eyes opened to what God wants to do in us and through us.