

Luke 24:44-53 (CEB)

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. Look, I’m sending to you what my Father promised, but you are to stay in the city until you have been furnished with heavenly power.” He led them out as far as Bethany, where he lifted his hands and blessed them. As he blessed them, he left them and was taken up to heaven. They worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem overwhelmed with joy. And they were continuously in the temple praising God.

Ephesians 1:15-23

Since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God’s people, this is the reason that I don’t stop giving thanks to God for you when I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, will give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation that makes God known to you. I pray that the eyes of your heart will have enough light to see what is the hope of God’s call, what is the richness of God’s glorious inheritance among believers, and what is the overwhelming greatness of God’s power that is working among us believers. This power is conferred by the energy of God’s powerful strength. God’s power was at work in Christ when God raised him from the dead and sat him at God’s right side in the heavens, far above every ruler and authority and power and angelic power, any power that might be named not only now but in the future. God put everything under Christ’s feet and made him head of everything in the church, which is his body. His body, the church, is the fullness of Christ, who fills everything in every way.

In High School there was a contemporary Christian song that became huge – I heard it at every Montreat Youth Conference I went to, we sang it in youth group, I heard it at school. It was everywhere. If you were alive when I was in High School, the early 2000s, you probably heard it, too. It goes like this, though I have to warn you that it’s an earworm, so if you hear it once you’ll be singing it in your head all day.

*Open the eyes of my heart, Lord
Open the eyes of my heart
I want to see You
I want to see You
To see You high and lifted up
Shinin' in the light of Your glory
Pour out Your power and love
As we sing holy, holy, holy*

And then it repeats those same lyrics in various combinations for like 3 and a half minutes, like is true for most contemporary Christian tunes, especially of that era. Why I thought of that song after reading our text for today should be pretty obvious, in fact *Open the Eyes of My Heart* was written based on Ephesians 1:18 – and if it’s not obvious take a look at the sermon title in the bulletin, a title that comes directly from the scripture. Here’s the thing though, I don’t think it’s a very good song. Aside from being

very catchy, I don't think it gets to the real point of Ephesians 1:18. Sure, one of the things Paul says our hearts should see is God's power, but seeing with the eyes of our hearts is about quite a bit more than simply witnessing how mighty and holy God is. So, if it doesn't get to the point of the words that it's based on, why have the song? I'm not a songwriter, so I don't know if it'd even be possible to capture the whole point of Paul's argument, but surely something a little more accurate would have been possible. I think what Paul is actually getting at is an important enough message that we should take a deeper dive into his words rather than simply listening to a 2000's contemporary Christian song based on those words.

The thing that the song got right, though, and the part of the text I love the most, is the idea that our hearts have eyes. What it means that our hearts can see is something that cannot be understated, especially because of what we have heard about the nature of God, particularly in light of 1 John's insistence that God is love. I think we're all aware of what our heart does physiologically, and none of what it does has anything to do with sight. Of course, it isn't meant to be taken literally since it'd be impossible to see anything through ventricles and aortas. To better understand what seeing with the heart might mean, we first have to remember that when we read scripture, we're reading ancient words. Even Ephesians, which was written sometime between 75-100 CE, is ancient and ancient peoples understood the world in a very different way than we do today. The heart for many ancient peoples was the essence of a person and home to the seat of all our emotions. A Roman physician who lived about 100 years after Ephesians was written spoke of the heart as the "hearthstone" of the body, the source of heat through which people are governed. Those understandings of the heart, as our emotional center and powerplant, go a long way in explaining how we can begin to understand what our heart can see. But there's more to discover, because if we're being told to see with our heart, we have to also consider what the other options for our sight could be. The obvious second option is the brain, and just as we have debates of head versus heart today, ancient peoples did, too. Aristotle thought that the brain was basically useless, little more than a vent for the heart to ensure that it didn't overheat. Galen, that same Roman physician who called the heart the body's hearthstone, understood that the brain had something to do with mental activity and believed that the brain housed people's animal soul, which he meant to mean our rational center. So, really, his understanding isn't much different from the arguments of head versus heart we have today; it was, and still is, about rational versus emotional. It might seem counterintuitive to argue that we should look at the world through our emotions rather than being rational, because it seems like a disaster to promote things like anger, greed, or other emotions with negative connotations over something as important as critical thinking. But understand that Paul isn't saying that we should see with all our emotions, he only means love. And viewing the world through the lens of love is often irrational. It's not rational to choose to love our enemies, the rational thing to do is to protect ourselves from them at all cost. It's not rational to choose to welcome all, the rational thing to do is to join small groups of like-minded people to be insulated from anything that might challenge what we believe. It's not rational to do much of what we are called to do as followers of Christ, and that is why we must use the eyes of our heart.

Ephesians is all about reminding the gentile Ephesian community that they had been adopted into the family of God, explaining the implications of the death and resurrection of Christ for them, and encouraging them to live in and through Christ. And it was by using the eyes of their hearts that enabled them to live through the love of Christ. What we've read today isn't what one commentator on the text called a "victory dance" wherein we can bask in the glory of our being claimed. It's a hopeful prayer that those that have been claimed have the ability to take the next steps of faith because they have been claimed. It's that point that makes *Open the Eyes of My Heart* not a very good song, because it is a song that's really only about that so-called "victory dance." Using the heart's eyes, those eyes of love, enable us, as Paul put it, to "see what is the hope of God's call, what is the richness of God's glorious inheritance among believers, and what is the overwhelming greatness of God's power that is working among us

believers.” To put it another way, by looking at the world through love we are able to see the hope embedded in our call to love God and neighbor, to see what we stand to gain by choosing to act on that call, and to see the power that comes by living through God’s love.

On this Ascension Sunday, a day in which we remember that Jesus, after he was raised from the dead, rose into heaven to sit at God’s right side, we are to remember that he is our eternal ruler. Just as the Ephesian community was reminded that they had been claimed as God’s own children, so are we reminded. And because we are God’s children, who have Christ as our Lord and King, we need to use the eyes of our hearts far more often than we do. We just got through a five-week long series of sermons on 1 John, and the message from that letter is the exact same as the message from Ephesians. And it’s not just limited to these two books, it’s the heart of the entire Bible. Love is the only way we are to live, because God is love and in love God sent Christ to us to be our way. It is through that love that we join together to become the body of Christ, and as Christ’s body, when we see with our hearts, we do as Christ calls us. Fulfilling our common call will radically change not only who we are, but the world around us. Love is one of those things that is contagious. The other night I was making dinner and opened a brand-new pack of tortillas only to discover that they had gone moldy, so Liz ran off to the grocery store for me to grab a new pack. In the checkout line she put her single item on the conveyor belt, dividing her order from the order of the person in front of her. When the cashier finished with all the items from the person in front of Liz, she also grabbed Liz’s tortillas and scanned them, too. Liz immediately jumped in and said, “oh no, those are mine,” thinking that it was a mistake – and I can tell you, as someone who has spent time as a grocery store cashier, that’s a mistake that happens quite a lot because it isn’t always easy to see where one order ends and another begins, even with that little bar that separates them. But the cashier said, “I know, this person just wanted to pay for it for you.” Liz looked at the woman in front of her and said, “you don’t have to do that,” and she replied, “I know, but I wanted to. Count it as a blessing.” That woman didn’t make a big deal out of buying an additional item that might have cost \$4, she didn’t even tell Liz that she was going to do it, it was simply an act of love she felt like she could offer in the moment. Liz came home and told me the story and her immediate reaction, after talking about how nice it was of that woman, was that she wanted to pay it forward. Because love is contagious. Maybe someone had done something similar for that woman recently and she felt like she wanted to do it for another, and Liz just so happened to be the recipient of her kindness, and if that’s the case, it only proves the point of how viral love can be. Love does not have to be grand. The most powerful acts of love usually aren’t. They’re simple things that infuse the recipients of them, changing them in little ways. And those little changes add up when love is constantly applied. The good news of the gospel is that Christ died, Christ rose again, and Christ reigns in power for you, all because God loves you. Though it’s so easy to look at the world in countless other ways, it is by using the eyes of our hearts, the eyes of love, that we are able to make Christ’s reign known for all. Close off the rational parts of your mind when that rationality leads you away from doing a kind act for another. Let generous, undeserved love become rational through your modeling of Christ’s actions. Open the eyes of your heart, not just to see God more clearly, but to act with the same love that has given you forgiveness and eternal life. Thanks be to God for the ability to choose this life of love, and through it, abundance. Amen.