**“Opened Eyes”**

November 3, 2024 Text: Luke 24:13-31

Reed Baer West Parish of Barnstable

We recently celebrated the 20th anniversary of something miraculous, something many had literally waited their whole lives for – the 2004 World Series championship of the Boston Red Sox. For all the die-hard fans haunted by the almost moments of the 1975 World Series loss to the Cincinnati Reds, by the Bill Buckner 9th inning boot of the 1986 loss to the Mets, by manager Grady Little’s unforgiveable decision to leave Pedro Martinez in the game leading to the loss to the hated Yankees in the 2003 ALCS, of all those “This could be the year” disappointments year after year -- for all those fans, the 2004 World Series victory, coming 86 years after the last championship, was nothing short of transcendent. In many ways, it was a memorable, life-changing experience for literally millions of long-suffering fans. When the tears of joy dried from our eyes, we saw the world in a different way – no longer were we the hard-luck, perennial losers, now we were on top of the world. Roll out the duck boats!

Maybe you had a similar experience at some time in your own life, in a swim event, on a solitary long distant run on the golf course, even just while off on a hike through the dunes in the off-season. I know I have had a couple such moments in my life. I will tell you about one.

I was a terrible athlete growing up, but finally found my niche in the sport of sailing. In my college days I lived and breathed intercollegiate sailing, on the water six days a week, traveling on weekends up and down the East Coast to race in different events. In the spring of my junior year we had a regatta at the Naval Academy in Annapolis, racing two-person dinghies called 420s. Melissa, my crew, and I had been sailing together regularly that year, but we finally hit on all cylinders that weekend. The turning point came midway through the first day of the event, a blustery, mid-April day, the wind gusting at up to twenty knots or so. We had posted some good finishes in the 18-boat fleet, but then got too aggressive at a start, were over the line early, and had to circle back and restart while the rest of the fleet merrily sailed off towards the weather mark.

Somehow finding a way to put my anger at flubbing the start behind me, we hiked out hard against the building breeze and started to battle back. We worked the boat hard, hit a few wind shifts correctly, and by the first mark had crawled up to third.

Down the first reach we went, and as we approached the next turning mark we had moved up to second, Melissa, with an “oomph” of determination, changed the jib to the opposite side of the boat and so propelled us to the inside position for rounding onto the next leg. I pushed the tiller over, we ducked as the boom whistled overhead, and as a huge puff of wind threatened to capsize us, we threw ourselves onto the new high side of the boat. Toes tucked under the hiking straps, legs out straight, sails trimmed in just right, the boat exploded forward, leaping onto a plane. We flew down the course, bouncing off wave after wave, spray everywhere, Melissa and I welded to each other as we kept our weight together to increase speed; and yet we were in total control of the boat, and without looking back I just knew we had left our competition in the dust. In my mind I was watching us from a distance, seeing us pull away; and yet I was fully present, perhaps more fully present that I had ever been in my life, to the boat and Melissa and wind and wave and everything that I cannot even describe. And we screamed and whooped with joy for the sheer bliss of doing what we knew we and this little boat were created to do.

It has to end, of course, and at the next mark it was back to the hard upwind grind, but we held on for the win, both of that race and the regatta. But I also had that memory, a memory I cherish to this day, of a time when I had been opened up in a way I could never have imagined.

Phil Jackson, former coach of the Chicago Bulls basketball team, and a former player for the NBA Knickerbockers, writes about a similar experience he had on the basketball court, about the way in which at times he seemed to transcend his abilities on the court:

“That’s when I come alive: on the basketball court. As the game unfolds, time slows down and I experience the blissful feeling of being totally engaged in action. One moment I may crack a joke and the next cast a woeful look at a ref. But all the while I am thinking: how many timeouts do we have left? Who needs to get going out there on the court? What’s up with my guys on the bench? My mind is completely focused on the goal, but with a sense of openness and joy.” (Hoop Dreams, p. 203)

On that first Easter Sunday, two of Jesus’ disciples plod down a road out of Jerusalem, heads down, defeated and saddened and alive in appearance only. A stranger comes near and walks with them, and his question brings them up short: “What are you talking about?” They tell him of Jesus of Nazareth, the one whom they had hoped would redeem Israel, who had been crucified and buried – of how their hopes had been buried with him. Their disappointment and sadness blind them to who they are with. And they sit with him at table, and this stranger takes common bread, blesses it and gives it to them – and their eyes are opened – their eyes are opened to the reality which lay beyond their previous, limited knowing – and in that joy they recognize Jesus.

God’s grace comes to us in many and varied ways, and it comes to us like this: in ways we can see, and feel, and taste, and touch. It can come to us in the most ordinary of experiences: on a small sailboat bounding over the waves, on the basketball court as we become one with the game, in the smile of a baby cradled for the first time in a grandparent’s arms, in a haiku poem reminding us of a lost memory, in the presence of a stranger, in simple bread and the juice of the vine.

How this happens is a mystery – it cannot be forced, we cannot pin down a God who is at once so immanent and at the same time so elusive. We can only be ready to receive that grace when it comes to us, when it cracks us open and lets us see if only for a moment that which lies beyond ordinary sight – and the experience leaves us open to a new fullness of life, encompassed by thanksgiving, almost gasping for joy.

So come to this table this morning. Come ready to meet the risen Christ in the breaking of the bread. Come, ready to have your eyes opened, to see how good God is, to see how things really are and really might be and will be. Come, and be ready to have your eyes opened. By the grace of Christ, they just might be. Amen.