

May 21, Ascension (Luke 24:44–53)

The disciples did not understand what was happening. What chance do we have?

by [Martha Spong](#) in the [May 20, 2020](#) issue

I am not a great memorizer. The verses of scripture I remember best and can reel off most easily are the ones I learned set to music, often in the King James Version or some other old-fashioned language. I believe that makes me an *aural* learner, one of seven accepted learning styles. Each uses a different part or parts of the brain. We all prioritize some, and we can develop the others, too.

My most effective means of metabolizing information and concepts is to read or listen and write things down (*verbal*); taking notes makes ideas concrete for me. I have frustrated many people trying to teach me things when their repetitions do not take hold because I could not write down what I was hearing. If you write notes in the margin of a book to catch a concept or phrase that will remind you later of what felt important, you are using this learning style.

I also hold onto things I hear while I am knitting (*physical*). Yet learning a new knitting skill is complicated for me, because I am not a particularly good *visual* learner. I can't grasp what seems obvious to others who look at an illustration or watch a YouTube video. My best chance at insight comes from reading the words over and over again until they make sense in the actions of my hands. When the moment of understanding comes, and the stitch works, I feel a rush of satisfaction, a kind of insight high.

What brings a lesson or a new understanding home for you?

The ascension account in Luke has three movements. First, the risen Lord “opened their minds to the scriptures” and gives guidance on what is to come. Next, he takes them out to Bethany for a blessing, during which he ascends. Finally, the disciples, after worshiping, go back to Jerusalem to praise God in the temple. Mission accomplished—now they understand!

We may note sadly that despite three years of direct teaching in multiple forms, the disciples' minds were still closed. When we think of the disciples, 11 of them, gathered around the risen Christ, we might try to imagine what supernatural pedagogy he employs with this audience of non-learners. In his human form, they failed to understand him, although they had the opportunity to travel with him, watching and listening as he interacted with crowds and individuals using storytelling, exhortation, and conversation as his teaching tools. They did not understand what was happening, did not understand who he was.

What chance do we have then, at this great distance, to share the good news effectively?

When we hope to get a point across, or teach a valuable life lesson, or deliver a saving message, we need to remember that not everyone learns the same way. A graphic or diagram may sway some people, while others respond to a personal story. Some want just the facts (*logical*), and others require a chance to talk things through (*social*). Some need to go away and contemplate things by themselves (*solitary*). Pastors, teachers, and even parents all carry a responsibility to inform listeners with wisdom and information that is truthful. But the message also requires an effective medium.

Discerning that method starts with knowing who you are trying to reach. Who around you needs a good word of encouragement, guidance, or comfort? How do they usually get information? We live in a complicated time, in which there are almost too many sources available to us, many of them in conflict with each other. In seasons of collective anxiety, we face the additional frustration that some consider even facts to be subject to interpretation. We must root our appeal in the basics of our faith, just as Jesus recounts the essentials of his teaching to the disciples: repentance and the forgiveness of sins, a message to be shared with all nations, or the heart of the gospel, love for God and neighbor.

How will you try to share what you believe? There is no one right way. Although I learn by taking notes and by writing and rewriting my thoughts, that doesn't mean they will be clear to readers—who add their own thoughts, experiences, and feelings to the equation of understanding. Consider the possibility that what seems obvious to you will not to others. Bring your varied learning styles to the task—your logic, or interpersonal skills, or gifts at bringing a good word alive in music, art, or movement.

We all want that insight high, that surge of joy, which relies on the moment when it all comes together. Sometimes my head is full of possibilities, but sitting at my desk does not bring them into a unified focus. The clarity I need comes when I take my dog for a walk, or talk it out with my spouse, a colleague, or a friend. It sometimes happens when I turn off everything else and try, for a little while, to be in that space where the voice I am hearing belongs to Christ.

The disciples' moment of realization is the hinge to the ascension story in Luke. Whatever we are struggling to comprehend, the possibility of enlightenment remains. For Christians, Jesus holds the door, guiding us to the insight high we cannot achieve alone, offering the promise of the Spirit's power, and opening the way to blessing and praise.