

May 26, Ascension (Luke 24:44-53)

Like the disciples at the ascension, we need a little help with interpretation.

by [Greg Carey](#) in the [May 18, 2022](#) issue

The disciples struggle to understand their encounter with the risen Jesus, so Jesus teaches them a new way to understand their scriptures. So too do we turn to the scriptures to make sense of our own lives. But we need help.

There's no such thing as pure experience. We interpret our experiences even as they happen, knowing we may tell our story to ourselves or to someone else at any time. No clean division, no gap in time, separates experience from interpretation.

I had a scary car accident when I was in college. My car hydroplaned in heavy rain, and I knew, for sure, I was about to hit a steel barrier head-on. I let go of the steering wheel and threw my upper body across the empty passenger seat. The crash happened. I sat up, collected myself, and realized I was intact and pain-free. But what about the car? Rather than striking the barrier head-on, my Datsun B210 slid into it almost perfectly parallel, like a boat docking beside a pier. I sensed no serious damage. Although I was at the bottom of a ditch in heavy rain, I managed to drive the car up the bank and back onto the freeway.

I was already thinking God thoughts before making it up the slope. My God thoughts are different today. But then I was formed to interpret every experience in terms of God's direction for my individual life. I wondered: Did angels intervene to save my life? If this was divine work, did that mean God held a special calling for me? All the things our American religious culture prepared me to ask, I asked.

When we survive a threatening situation, we experience a moment of joy and gratitude. Even nonreligious folk are prone to mutter, "Thank God," in such moments. Whether the moment is happy or sad, we go into a mode of reflection. We ask, "What does this mean?" We interpret our lives looking backward.

The ascension story finds the disciples struggling to understand. The lectionary hides this reality somewhat, beginning the reading at Luke 24:44. This choice joins Jesus' instructions to his disciples with his ascension, but it also breaks in two the single scene that runs from verse 33 to 49. The risen Jesus greets the larger group of disciples. At first they mistake him for a ghost. When Jesus reveals himself, complete with his wounds, the disciples respond as people do, with a bundle of mixed emotions: "in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering." The disciples need help making sense of this encounter with the risen Jesus. Their joy leaves them both doubtful and amazed.

Jesus helps the disciples understand by "opening their minds." The phrase recalls the earlier encounter on the road to Emmaus (24:13-35). Jesus, risen and incognito, explains the scriptures to two disciples as he will to the rest. Those two only recognize Jesus when he takes, blesses, breaks, and distributes the bread—a eucharistic moment if ever there were one. Only then are their eyes "opened." Now, as Jesus expounds on scripture to the gathered disciples, it is necessary to open their *minds*. "Thus it is written," say Moses and the prophets and the Psalms, that the Messiah would suffer and be raised from the dead, that repentance and forgiveness would be proclaimed to all peoples.

But wait. The scriptures say none of those things, not exactly. Without guidance, nobody would read the Hebrew Bible and conclude that a messiah would come who would suffer, die, and be raised from the dead. No one read it that way in Jesus' day. Only with the most profound contortions do some Christians identify proof texts to justify what Jesus says in this moment.

Jesus opens the disciples' minds to understand the scriptures differently because reading them a certain way requires starting with new assumptions. From very early on Christians have argued that Jews who did not acknowledge Jesus as Lord failed to understand their own scriptures. We call this replacement theology, the insidious notion that Christianity displaces Israel in God's saving work. A faithful God would never call Israel and then discard them, as too many Christians imagine. Luke's Jesus seems to be saying something different: his followers will understand the scriptures differently in the light of his death and resurrection, and with his guidance.

Theology works backward. We look back on our experience through the resources of faith, seeking God's presence therein. As soon as my car came to a safe stop more

than 35 years ago, I began that work of making sense of how I remained intact. This is how we make sense of life.

It is also how we make sense of scripture. We bring our lives, our faith formation, and our communities to it. Faithful interpretation requires having our senses attuned to the work God is doing and has done to redeem our world. It requires reading backward from our present to our ancient texts.

We know too well how this process can be abused. Christians are prone to justify all kinds of wickedness, from warfare to discrimination against the poor, by means of perverse interpretation. Faithful interpretation requires a leap of disciplined imagination—one best performed in community. It also requires help from a God who guides our understanding.