

**UNDERSTANDING SCRIPTURE**  
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

**Luke 24:36b-48**

While they were talking about this [rumors that the dead Jesus had been seen in Emmaus], Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence. Then he 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 of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.

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Jesus opened their minds to understand the scriptures.

Consider this: if those disciples had trouble understanding scripture, what about us? They at least understood Hebrew, the written language of their Scripture. Plus they were only a few centuries removed from Scripture's formative stories and events. We, on the other hand, are at least 2000 years, a continent and an ocean removed.

But not to worry. Understanding the Bible is important but not essential for Christian faith. Most Christians over the past 2000 years did not have much, if any, access to the Bible. Faith was nourished by preaching, teaching, daily rituals, and weekly practices, including the Lord's Supper.

Understanding the Bible is important but not essential for Christian faith. In fact, easy access to Bibles is fairly recent. Many Christians in the past and many now couldn't read one even if they had one. But we do and can. Still it's not easy to understand scripture. Let me suggest why that is so.

This is the Bible as it looks now. [Show Bible] It once looked more like this. [Show a bunch of DVDs]. No, the Bible did not begin as DVDs. But it was once dozens of separate scrolls.

Each scroll had its own history the way each DVD has a history of composition and editing before reaching its final form. Originally there were collections of scrolls in various places, not one continuous scroll or one book. That happened much later as print technology developed. The Bible as one book is misleading and leads to some great misunderstandings.

In the time of scrolls, most scrolls looked similar. Their contents, however, were quite different just as DVDs look alike but are quite different in content, type or genre. Some scrolls contained historical accounts; others contained poems, songs, homilies, letters, folktales, myths, dietary rules, health codes, dress regulations, memoirs, and essays. Job,

probably the oldest book in the Bible, is a play meant for the stage. Revelation, the last book in the Bible, is similar to a comic book.

Now imagine we compiled 60 DVDs into one DVD to represent America culture and values. Which movie would be first and which last and why? Who would make the selections, determine the order, and on what basis or for what purpose?

Now imagine that one single DVD somehow survived and was copied and copied and viewed by people in every country of the world 500 years from now. Might there be problems in understanding and making sense of it?

Even if the movies were dubbed in the native language don't you think a lot would be lost in translation? And what if viewers didn't know the difference between a film like *Schindler's List*, *O Brother Man*, *Friday the 13th*, *Peter Pan* and *Wall-E*? Don't you think great confusion would ensue?

Now imagine the arguments and bloodshed if that one DVD containing 60 different films was thought to be God's infallible word. Well, you might say, that would never happen. But something like that did happen once.

The Bible contains the equivalent of 60 DVDs composed and compiled by people who lived thousands of years ago in cultures and societies much different than are own. None were composed with the idea that they would one day be part of a collection called "God's Word."

When these texts were composed the universe was deemed much smaller and more intimate than we now know it to be. The earth was flat. The sun and everything else revolved around this one planet. Heaven was nearby, out of reach but not impossibly far away. Gods of all kinds were cited to explain much that we now know have other causes.

And yet despite these cultural and temporal limitations and flaws the Bible conveys timeless wisdom. Be kind. Forgive. Love boldly. Be gracious. Be grateful. Be humble. Fear not. Trust the Spirit in the earth. The world is good. We mess up but grace and forgiveness abounds. And, yes, there is much good work to be done in this world.

The Bible is a precious treasure. We respect and honor it as we respect and honor our parents and grandparents; but we don't worship it or them.

Understanding scripture, like understanding parents, is not easy. But it's not impossible

If understanding scripture is important (as it is in this Presbyterian tradition), we will make an effort to understand its historic, cultural and linguistic context. Education, scholarship, good teachers and good books help a lot.

And we can do one other thing. We can read the Bible with others and allow our imaginations to have some fun. For, you see, the Bible is, in a sense, a living document quickened by the Spirit, a spirit that delights in creativity. Have fun but be humble. After all, everyone has an equal right to his or her opinion; but all opinions are not equal.

Which brings us to the lesson before us this morning. At first it looks like a report of something that happened at one time in one place. But the gospels were composed by first century Jews and filtered through a matrix of older Jewish stories and symbols. Many but not all are found in what we call the Old Testament. Jewish stories tend to utilize symbols to move the heart more than facts to convince the mind. So "Jesus" in these gospel stories might be seen as something more than himself.

In the gospels Jesus is not only a historical person but he might also stand as an icon of universal love, a symbol of the rising and expanding community of the Beloved. You

see, not only did Jesus teach with parables, such as the Good Samaritan and the prodigal son, but the gospels as a whole may be understood as extended parables with “Jesus” as a kind of prop or symbol.

*He showed them his hands and his feet.*

From time to time we encounter those who have been “wounded and scarred” by the world in one way or another. They may seem as ghosts, or abstractions, or statistics. But when we share our gifts, when we share ourselves with them—represented in this story by the broiled fish—Christ becomes real, which is to say: love becomes real and the Scriptures themselves suddenly make sense.

There’s a lot more that could be said about understanding Scripture but that, I think, is enough for this morning.