



## Upward and Onward

Luke 24:44-53

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Over the past 43 days, since the day we celebrated Easter, we have been considering some of the more theologically reprehensible Christian clichés. We have identified that there are sayings in our Christian vocabulary that, while seeking to offer a word of support or promise, instead fall drastically short of God's will. As our guest preacher, Dr. Greg Boyd, said a month ago, if the truest nature of God is represented in Christ on the cross, which is a selfless and humble sacrifice that provides new life for humanity, then anything that doesn't look or sound like *that* is probably not fully reflective of God's love.

In calling out the problems in our Christian lingo, we've also considered more faithful responses to people who are dealing with difficulties and people with whom we disagree. Such a model of teaching is based on the very practice of Christ, who not only spoke against some of the hypocritical practices of the temple leaders, but also offered a better way to understand God's call to faithfulness. Christ was always looking toward the future. He focused on the way things should be, and on the promise of God's full and complete reign.

Our scripture today offers us a final glimpse of Christ's earthly ministry, and thus provides for us Christ's final teaching. After Christ's resurrection from the grave, he appeared to the disciples and made himself known in resurrected form. His time with them following the resurrection was short. Depending on your reading of scripture, it could be argued that Christ was only present for a day following the resurrection; though, other passages offer Christ was present for 40 days following the resurrection. The Church has traditionally celebrated Christ's final departure from earth in the Ascension 40 days after Easter, and it is thus celebrated on this final Sunday of the Easter season, a week before the celebration of Pentecost.

I want to look closely at this text today and consider, what does Christ's final teaching offer us? What is the Ascension, and what does this event offer us for faithful living today?

The narration of the text in our reading begins by saying, "Then he said to them ..." According to Luke's Gospel, following the resurrection, Jesus had gathered with the disciples in Jerusalem. The disciples are still in shock of his resurrection. They appear to still be unsure of all that has unfolded in the crucifixion and resurrection. But Jesus is there with them, showing them the marks on his hands and feet, and sharing in a meal with them.

Jesus then offers this teaching, "These are the 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."

Christ is reminding them of all that he had taught them prior to his crucifixion. He is calling on their memory. “Consider,” he says, “do you remember all that I had taught you? Do you remember the stories of our faith that I used in teaching?” ... Indeed, Christ quoted from the Hebrew Scriptures with some regularity. He quoted Isaiah, Exodus, Deuteronomy, and the Psalms over 35 times, not to mention other texts he used. He has used the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms to point to his ministry as Messiah.

Back to our text: In verse 45, we read, “Then Jesus 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 to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem.’”

Jesus isn’t quoting scriptures they hadn’t heard before – these are faithful Jews. Instead of bringing in new texts, Jesus is stressing “continuity between the words of the risen Christ and the historical Jesus ... and between the historical Jesus and the Old Testament Scriptures.”<sup>i</sup> He’s emphasizing that everything he’s teaching now, in the resurrection, is directly connected to what he had taught them prior to his death, and that his full ministry, suffering, and resurrection are fulfillments of the writings of the Jewish Scriptures.

When Jesus says, “It is written,” what’s he means is, *it has been God’s plan all along*. He’s not trying to teach them anything new at this point. His final word in his departure is not to offer more instructions for faithful living. What he’s saying now is that everything you need to know going forward has already been instructed. And with this commendation, he’s opening their eyes to the connection of the Jewish Scriptures and his ministry.

In preparation for his departure, Jesus makes the connection to all that *has been* in an attempt to offer a word of purpose for what is to come. Following the naming of their purpose he gives them clarity of mission. He says, “You are witnesses of these things.” Not only has he made the revelation of his role as Messiah clear, he’s now making clear for the disciples their role.

In the context of faith, not unlike that of a court room, witnesses are not simply those who have seen, witnesses are expected to share with others what they have experienced. To be a witness doesn’t mean you have to convince someone else of what you experienced; you simply have to name what you saw, state what happened, and then allow the other to make out of the story what they will.

Jesus has given the disciples a connected purpose to the history of all that has been; he offers them a full understanding of who he is – the Messiah, the Lord. And then he gives them a calling for what they should do; he gives them a mission.

In today’s world, offering purpose and defining clarity of mission are what most leaders strive for. In most leadership training events today, these two pieces are the primary stressors. If you can successfully offer a foundation for the purpose of an organization, and then clearly

articulate clarity in mission, naming what it takes to live out your purpose, you have what it takes to lead people into collaborative and successful action.

When a leader can't do these two things – and they are both necessary – you wind up floundering. Without these two things, there is no unified focus for action. With no unified focus, the work of the body becomes fruitless. What you end up with is a body of individuals seeking to make something happen on their own with no cooperative support or community cohesion. I dare say you can take a short drive north of the river and you'll see a good national example of what happens when there is no foundation of purpose or clarity of mission.

But Jesus names purpose in making the connection to his being the Messiah as it is revealed in the Jewish Scriptures. He says his suffering and resurrection makes it possible for repentance and the forgiveness of sins, and that our purpose is to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins in the name of Christ to all nations. That's the purpose – that's why the disciples existed.

And then he names clarity of mission, saying this will happen in that the disciples will be witnesses to these things. The disciples, by sharing their personal testimony of what they have seen, and experienced, and lived, will let all nations know that in the name of Christ repentance and forgiveness of sins is possible.

You would think that Christ, having named the purpose and mission, would then send the disciples out to go and be witnesses. He builds them up, enlightening them as to what's next for them. I can only imagine, being the projecting extrovert I am, that the disciples were ready to go. But Christ says, "And see, I am sending you what the Father has promised, so stay here until you have been clothed with power from on high."

What a momentum killer. The disciples were all pumped up, ready to go out and preach in the name of Christ, and then Christ says, stay here and wait.

They have purpose, they have mission, but they do not yet have power; they do not yet have the Holy Spirit, whom God is sending to empower the disciples.

Christ takes the disciples out to Bethany, which is just a few miles East of Jerusalem. Bethany is where Jesus stayed during Holy Week. It would be like the edge of the suburban sprawl of the city. Jesus took the disciples to the trail head that would lead to their mission field to go in to all nations, but Christ prevented them from beginning their journey until they were clothed with power from on high. He has them on the cusp of going forth, but says stay here and wait. The power of God, the Spirit will come, and you will be led forth by the power.

Jesus offers them a blessing and then departed from them. Jesus ascended into the heavens. And frankly, I don't know what this means. I don't know if this was Star Trek like experience, where Christ called up to God, and said, "Beam me up Father." ... I don't know if the cartoons are right that Christ levitated into the heavens. ... I don't know if Christ just disappeared before their eyes like a scene from Field of Dreams, where he evaporated as he walked into the

wilderness. ... I don't know what the ascension *looked* like, and quite frankly, I don't think how Jesus departed really matters. I don't think it matters, because it didn't seem to matter to the disciples. After Jesus' departure, they didn't seem to sit around wondering what had just happened. They weren't playing guessing games or cashing in on bets as to how Jesus would ascend into heaven.

Jesus departed them, and the disciples worshipped Christ. The disciples don't necessarily understand what just happened or what they just saw, but, "aware that God has been at work among them, they remember the past, they acknowledge the present, and they claim the future."<sup>ii</sup> They returned to Jerusalem where they would wait, but they would not wait idly in anticipation of the power to come in the gift of the Spirit. The disciples went and praised God in the temple. They relied on what they knew (worship in the temple) in expectancy of that which they did not yet know.

Upon Christ's departure, the disciples don't look longingly back home to Galilee, they aren't downtrodden or dejected by Christ's departure. "Instead, they look for the power from on high, and in this hope they return to Jerusalem and to the temple, full of joy and blessing God."<sup>iii</sup>

This year, the Leadership Board of our church has been working a great deal on offering clarity around who we are at Washington Street United Methodist Church. We're a church that has been in ministry for 168 years. I asked the question, what does it mean that we are a church that is *Making a Place for Everyone*? That is our mission – that is our call in all that we do. *We believe God is love, and so we're making a place for everyone to know that love.*

I asked the Board, as I asked many of you as far back as December, to consider, what does that mission mean for you? What are the core values that underlie our mission? What is our purpose? As the Board considered all of the received responses, we came up with three primary values that strike a historical chord within the narrative of this church. Underlying our mission statement are these three values: Engaging and creative discipleship; Welcoming and nurturing community; and Connecting for social justice. These three values name our purpose – they define at our core why we exist. We exist to offer engaging and creative discipleship; we exist to offer a welcoming and nurturing community; and we exist to be a place of connecting for social justice.

Our mission, as defined by our community, lies in the promise that God is love. And for the purpose of Engaging, and Welcoming, and Connecting, *we're Making a Place for Everyone to know the love of God.*

As I think about Christ's final teaching, what stirs in my heart is the question, what comes next? What is the next endeavor we will take collectively? What is the next ministry you will join individually? Christ called the disciples to wait for the power of the Spirit, knowing that once the power of the Spirit had arrived, they would henceforth be moving into the world to share God's promise of the forgiveness of sins, made possible in Christ.

And so, I wonder, in this place, in this time, in this world today, where will the power of the God lead us? What are the gifts the Spirit will provide among us, and how will we respond?

“Waiting creates space for preparation, for anticipation, for other things to be set in motion and come to maturity. Waiting is not necessarily an absence of movement but holds its own presence and power.”<sup>iv</sup> Christ calls the disciples to wait, but promises the coming power of God in the Holy Spirit. If the historical text of our faith guarantees us anything, it promises that “If God says power will be given, power *will* be given!”<sup>v</sup>

So, I invite you, as we reflect on this Memorial Day weekend and the sacrifices of so many in the past who have made today possible ... given our purpose and mission, what sacrifices will you make going forward, in the promise of the gift of the Spirit, that we may continue to be a part of God’s great work in the world, creating a better world, a more God-focused world, for tomorrow? Friends, let us worship the Lord as we wait, that we may be ready to go when the power of God in the gift of the Spirit makes itself known. For the glory of God, Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Fred B. Craddock. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Luke*. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2009.

<sup>ii</sup> F Belton Joyner, Jr. *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Feasting on the Word; Year C, Volume 2*. Eds. David L Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

<sup>iii</sup> Craddock.

<sup>iv</sup> David Lose. Davidlose.net. Retrieved May 23, 2017.

<sup>v</sup> Joyner.