



You Don't Have to Go Home ...

Luke 24:44-53

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Once more, let us rejoice and proclaim the promise of Easter – He is Risen! **He is Risen Indeed!**

Following the 40 days of Lent, we entered the *season* of Easter. Following the 40 days of Easter, we celebrate the Ascension. Last Thursday was Ascension Day, and it marks the official end of the Easter season.

You can consider this morning's sermon *part 1* of 2, for the Ascension is merely the precursor to what comes next. We're going to borrow from the famous Semisonic hit, which reminds us that every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end.

As we look at our scriptural text for the morning, let's walk ourselves back to the resurrection morning and refresh our minds as to how we got here.

Jesus had been crucified and was laid to rest in a tomb. The three women went to the tomb on the morning of that third day, and they found the tomb was empty. They were told that Jesus was not there, but that he had risen, and gone ahead of them. The women were told to go and proclaim the good news of Christ's resurrection to the disciples.

The women ran from the tomb, uncertain and unsure of what they had just experienced.

The four gospel authors recall how, following that morning, Jesus appeared in resurrected form to his followers. *Matthew* tells us that Jesus appeared to Mary at the tomb before he went and met the disciples in Galilee. There in Galilee, Jesus spoke to disciples the great commission, "to go forth and make disciples of all nations." *Mark* tells us that Jesus appeared to two of his followers walking into the country, and then appeared to the 11 disciples at a table. *Luke* expands those stories, first of the two men walking into the country, giving us the details of the conversation between Jesus and the two men on the road to Emmaus. We are told they knew him to be Jesus in the breaking of the bread at the table. *Luke* also tells us that Jesus appeared to the 11 disciples, who thought they were seeing a ghost. Jesus had them touch his hands and feet, saying, "a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see that I have." *John* includes this same story, saying, "when it was evening on that day, the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked in fear of the Jews, and Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." John also reminds us that Thomas, the doubter, did not believe at first sight, but later touched Jesus' hands and felt his wounds, and then believed him to be the resurrected Lord.

These stories recount the forty days of Jesus' presence in resurrected form.

As we get to the moment of Jesus' ascension, consider the mental, spiritual, and emotional state of the disciples.

The fact that the disciples had locked themselves into the upper room prior to Jesus' resurrection gives us some indication of their mental state upon his death. They had been following Jesus for three years, witnessing his miracles, listening to his teachings, and watching his interactions with the world. The disciples had been privy to some information that was withheld from the rest of the community. You will find numerous examples of how Jesus spoke to the masses in parables, and turned privately to the disciples to expand upon the meaning of those parables.

The disciples are the folks who are supposed to "get" Jesus. They're supposed to understand his purpose, his path, and his commitment to the will of God. They're supposed to be the ones who understand that he will be killed, but will also be raised again.

And yet, though they are part of the "in" crowd, they didn't get it. They missed the significance of his teaching, even though he reiterated it numerous times.

Post-resurrection, the disciples seemed to have a difficult time embracing the fact that Jesus was physically there, in the flesh. Their world had been shattered, and they thought they were seeing a ghost when Jesus first appeared in resurrected form.

It took a hot minute for them to really grasp that Jesus had been raised.

Following his death and resurrection, the disciples went through an assortment of reactions, from disappointment, to mourning, to fear, to unbelieving, to rejoicing.

What a swing of emotions.

And now that Jesus is back – now that they've felt his wounds, and embraced his resurrected body, you can imagine the kinds of hopes and vision that flooded their mind for what the future might hold.

Again, put yourself in their mental thoughts. "They tried to kill my Lord, and yet, try as they might, he has been born anew. He is raised from the dead."

Can you imagine the confidence the disciples must have felt as this new reality set in?

The person you had been following and hailed as the Messiah ... the one who had been called the "king of the Jews" ... the one who had been praised as the Savior ... the one who had challenged the temple elders ... the one who had literally healed the wounded, and had raised a man from the dead ... the one who had been arrested and hung on the cross by the Romans ... the one who the empire tried to shut up ... *that guy* ... that guy has just been raised from the dead.

You temple elders ... *Y'all in trooooouuuuuble.*

You Romans ... *Y'all done messed up now.*

Can you even imagine how the disciples felt as that reality sank in. **Jesus is back.**

MmmmMmmm ... Praise be to God. He is risen indeed!

And then, just 40 days later, Jesus is walking with the disciples along the outskirts of the Holy City, and he says 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 said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and the repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.'"

Just as Jesus had done with the two followers on the road to Emmaus, Jesus opens the minds of the disciples. He helped them see like they had never seen before. He helped them understand what they had clearly missed the first time around.

Jesus proclaims that what he has done is nothing new. Jesus' ministry offers continuity to the ancient texts of the Hebrew Scriptures. There's a named confession that what God had been doing throughout the history of creation is *continued* in Christ. Jesus says, "It is written ...", which means, "it has been God's plan all along." Jesus isn't declaring something bold and new to the disciples, he's simply helping them understand that which has already been proclaimed.

Along with this teaching moment of scriptural history, Jesus ties the ancient story into the future reality. You, Jesus says, you all are part of this story. "The repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in [the Messiah's] name to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem." This is where you all come in ... "You are witnesses to these things."

Jesus is conveying that the work of the disciples going forward is just the next faithful step in the witness of the ancient texts.

In detailing what comes next, Jesus offers the bigger picture. This work begins here in Jerusalem, but it doesn't stay here. God's work is expansive, and will go forth to all nations as a proclamation of the repentance and forgiveness of sin in Jesus' name.

Following this historical reflection and missional proclamation, at the end of verse 49 it seems Jesus pauses the conversation. Verse 50 picks up with a bit of narrative movement, writing, "Then [Jesus] led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God."

Once again, let's try to put ourselves in the sandals of the disciples. We're walking with Jesus, heading out toward Bethany, a small town on the eastern side of the Mount of Olives. As we arrive in the village, Jesus raises his hands and offers us a blessing. It is his final act of ministry – to bless the disciples. *As he is praying*, he is carried up into heaven. He ascended into heaven.

The visual of the ascension is a much-debated topic. Did Jesus simply vanish into thin air, like the players exiting the Field of Dreams? Was he physically lifted up into the air, like an acrobat suspended with hidden cables? Did he shoot up into the sky, like a superhero? Was there a heavenly host that came and escorted him up, like an angelic chariot that rode out using the stairway to heaven? What *actually* happened?

What if I told you it doesn't really matter how it happened?

The gospel doesn't give Jesus' departure a cool name like "the ascension." Luke simply says Jesus withdrew and was carried off ... and that's the end of that. If the theatrics of the ascension were that important, Luke would have spent more time detailing the visual of the moment. But in this moment, at least for Luke, Jesus' departure isn't what matters most. Luke quickly turns back to the disciples, who have taken a posture of worship, giving thanks to God, and celebrating with joy.

Did you catch that? What a change in the demeanor of the disciples.

Just 41 days earlier, the disciples had locked themselves into a closed room, fearful of Jesus' absence. Yet now, as Jesus vanishes before their eyes, they no longer seem to mind that Jesus has departed. In fact, following Jesus' departure, the disciples leave Bethany, making the trek back across the Mount of Olives, down through the Kidron Valley, and up into the Holy City of Jerusalem, where they went to the temple, of all places, and there they were continually blessing God.

Just 41 days earlier, the disciples were so fearful of the Jews, that they isolated themselves in a locked room. Now, they are in the presence of the Jews at the most significant of Jewish locations, the temple, blessing God in public.

Just 41 days earlier, the disciples weren't sure what would become of them because Jesus was gone. Now, Jesus has gone again, this time not to return, and the disciples were filled with great joy.

Just 41 days earlier, the disciples were stymied, unsure of what they could or should do next. Now, they are filled with mission and purpose, and their mission and purpose have been rooted in the historic life and teaching of the Hebrew Scriptures.

What they did not understand before ... what lack of knowledge led them into isolation before ... what uncertainty had caused them to fear before ... what failure to trust had brought them such anxiety before .. all of that has been relieved, because they now understand what they had not yet understood. They can now see Jesus in the context of the full story of God.

Notice, as they return the temple, they are not blessing Jesus in the temple ... they are blessing God. They have finally grasped the many teachings of Jesus, like when Jesus says, "no one gets to the Father, except through the Son." They have finally understood that Jesus, as the Messiah, is part of God's work in the world to teach us God's way, to demonstrate God's love, to witness to God's expansive invitation to new life.

The disciples have also grasped that this invitation does not send them back home. Following Jesus' death, following the last time Jesus seemed to be gone, the disciples went back to Galilee – back to their hometown. There, following the resurrection, Jesus met the disciples on the side of the Galilean Sea. But this time? This time that Jesus departs, and ascends into the heavens? The disciples now know the full story, and they understand: they cannot go back home. There is still work to be done. Even in Jesus' absence, they know there is more to do.

Jesus' departure is not the end, for every new beginning comes from some other beginnings' end.

The disciples returned to Jerusalem filled with joy, and they blessed God in the temple every day, and they waited.

They knew they could not go home, so they waited.

This week, we wait with the disciples, blessing and giving thanks to God for the life, teaching, death and resurrection, and the ascension of Christ, which calls us to receive the invitation to share in the work and the glory of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.