

Aftermath: Rising Up

Luke 24:36-53

*The risen Christ calls us to rise
to the challenge of discipleship.*

A sermon preached by
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Carol Matlock, one of our church members, was showing me her new bracelet leaving church last Sunday. It was a gift from her daughter, and each charm on the bracelet was symbolic of something about the life of Jesus: a star for the birth, a cross for Holy Week, 12 beads for the disciples, a dove for the Holy Spirit, and so forth. I thought it was a neat way to remember the life of Christ and sort of keep the story with you all the time. And Carol said it's a good conversation starter with people she meets.

That is basically what we do every year in our cycle of worship. We call it the liturgical calendar, and many churches follow a similar pattern. We start with Advent in December, leading up to the birth of Jesus at Christmas. We follow that with Epiphany, which remembers the revelation of God in Jesus and his teaching and healing ministry. Then we go into Lent, which is a time of spiritual preparation for the events of Holy Week. In Holy Week every year, we focus on the passion, crucifixion, and death of Jesus. Then, of course, we celebrate his resurrection on Easter. Following Easter, we have been focusing on his appearances to the disciples and his crucial teachings. Then the last big event that we celebrate every year is Pentecost, when we remember the coming of the Holy Spirit on the disciples and the birth of the church.

The rehearsal of that story takes about half a year. We tell the story every year, because it's our story. It's the foundation of our faith. It's God working in our world through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus to save you, me, and the world. It never gets old. I've been telling the story for decades, and I am still learning it. This is the story that gives us strength and courage and hope and joy. This is the story that leads us to abundant and eternal life.

Today we are on the next-to-last stop on the journey. The Ascension of Jesus happened, according to the Book of Acts, 40 days after Easter, 10 days before Pentecost. It is the story of Jesus returning to his place at the right hand of the throne of God, leaving the disciples worshipping and praying until the Holy Spirit arrived on Pentecost.

To me, it's always been kind of a goofy scene. Jesus says his last words, lifts up his arms, and blasts off into heaven. The disciples stand around open-mouthed, going "Wow! Didja see that?" It always reminds me of a video I saw a few years ago of an Assembly of God Church out in Arizona that was putting on a play about the life of Christ. When the time came for the Ascension, the actor playing Jesus was hoisted up on a cable above the stage. The only problem was, the cable had somehow become twisted, and when they raised him up, he rotated away from the audience. His white robe parted to reveal the cable harness and that all he had on under his robe was a pair of boxer shorts! Some things you can't unsee.

The Ascension of Jesus sort of stretches the limits of our credulity. How did this happen? Did it really happen? What does it mean? That's where faith comes in. Oswald Chambers, in his classic devotional book, *My Utmost For His Highest*, comments, "Loyalty to Jesus means I have to step out where I do not see anything. Loyalty to my notions means that I clear the ground first by my intelligence. Faith is not intelligent understanding; faith is deliberate commitment to a Person where I see no way."¹

I don't think we have to worry too much about the mechanics of the Ascension. Luke didn't. In the Gospel reading today, the Ascension happens on Easter evening. In Acts—same author—it happens after 40 days. That's not the important part. The important part is what Luke is trying to communicate in this wonderful, amazing, and perhaps a little confusing story. Like the Emmaus story, which comes right before this one, Luke sees this as a teachable moment. What is he trying to teach us?

The first point he makes is the reality of the resurrection, or perhaps we should say, the physicality of the resurrection. From the very beginning, some doubted the physical reality of the resurrection. They thought perhaps only the spirit of Jesus rose. This idea actually became more prevalent as time went on, prompting the Church Fathers to add into the creed that we believe in "the resurrection of the body."

It's interesting that this portion of the Gospel of Luke seems to have more in common with the Gospel of John than it does the other Synoptic Gospels (Matthew and Mark, with which there is usually more similarity). Compare this to John chapter 20:19-21: "*While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them (like coming through the door) and said to them, 'Peace be with you.'* (what he said in John) *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."² Just like in that Easter afternoon appearance in John.

Apparently they were not all convinced by touching him, so Jesus asked for something to eat and swallowed a piece of fish, just like he did in John 21 by the Sea of Galilee. Ghosts don't eat fish! How could there be any doubt that the resurrection of Jesus was a real, bodily, physical resurrection? Yet there is. Scientists say that such an event would require the complete coordination of thousands of bodily processes and trillions of dead cells returning to life, and that the knowledge of how that would be done and the energy it would take to do it is just staggering.³ Again, don't worry about the mechanics. You won't figure it out. But without a doubt, for Luke and the other Gospels, for Paul and for the early church, it was important to understand that the resurrection of Jesus was physical.

The second point Luke is making with our passage today is that the death and resurrection of Jesus was no surprise. With the two men walking to Emmaus, Jesus opened up the Scriptures and explained how this was all part of the plan. Again with the disciples, who had just heard the report from Cleopas and his friend, Jesus illuminates Scripture, which points to the necessity of what happened to him: “*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.*’”⁴ This was all the plan of God, so it had to be fulfilled.

Did God really will the death of God’s only Son? Did God send Jesus to earth in order to kill him? Is God the sort of deity that would demand a bloody sacrifice for the sins of the people? Is the cross God’s will? That is a deep theological discussion that has been going on for years, if not centuries. How you answer that question depends on how you think about God’s will. I believe God’s ultimate will is to heal the world, to offer forgiveness and life to all of God’s children. God made the world, and it was broken by sin. God gave the Law and the covenant, and they were broken by sin. God sent the prophets to heal the world, and they were rejected. Finally, God sent Jesus to show the world God’s love, to teach, to heal, and show the way of life. God’s preferred response to Jesus would have been for everyone to repent, receive forgiveness, and live lives of love. But again, sin destroyed what God had sent for good. Because God is infinite, God knew that would happen; God saw the cross coming. But God allowed evil to run its course in order to achieve God’s ultimate will—the salvation of earth. Even in the tragedy of the cross, God was at work to bring good out of evil, because that’s what God does—“*In all things God works for good.*”⁵ In that sense, God did not will the death of God’s only Son, but God’s response to the death of Jesus was the resurrection, which ultimately accomplished the will of God.

The final bit of teaching in Luke’s story of the Ascension is a call to mission. All four Gospels have some language come from the lips of Jesus that sends the disciples out into the world—to baptize, to teach, to make disciples, to feed the sheep, to tell the good news. In our text today, Jesus tells his men, “*Repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in [my] name to all nations, beginning from 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.*”⁶ The disciples have a job to do, and Jesus himself will provide the power that it will take to change the world. When it comes down to it, Jesus is depending on us.

William Barclay tells a story about Jesus after the Ascension gazing down from heaven on the earth. The angel Gabriel happened by and asked the Lord if everyone on earth knew what he had done for them, how he had suffered for them. Jesus replied, “No, only a few people in Palestine know.”

Gabriel asked, “So what have you done to make sure the message gets out?”

Jesus answered, “I have asked Peter and James and John and a few others to make it their life’s work to tell others about me, beginning in Jerusalem and passing it along until everyone in the world knows.”

Gabriel didn’t want to be disrespectful, but he said, “Lord, you know how people are! What if they get tired? What if they get discouraged? What if they forget important parts

of your teaching? What if years from now the movement dies out for lack of a witness? What other plans have you made?"

Jesus looked down on the earth and said simply, "I have no other plans."⁷

St. Teresa of Avila, the 16th century mystic, said, "Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks with compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands; yours are the feet; yours are the eyes; you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours."⁸

This is the challenge of discipleship—to be the hands, feet, and eyes of Christ in the world. We are the body of Christ on earth, the only way Jesus has to fulfill God's plan of salvation. The risen Christ calls us to rise to the challenge of discipleship.

John Wesley used to ask discipleship questions to his followers in the early days of the Methodist movement. Maybe we need a little Wesleyan discipleship examination today. Think about how your discipleship has been trending lately.

How's your prayer life? Are you making time to spend with God in prayer each day? Are you experiencing the indwelling of the Holy Spirit? Are you seeing the fruits of your prayers being answered?

Is worship part of your weekly walk of faith? (It is this week, I know.) Do you gather with the other parts of the body to give glory to God, fill your spiritual tank, and get sent out to serve Christ in the world?

Are you learning more about following Jesus from your study of Scripture? Are you reading the Word? Are you studying with a class or group, digging deep into Scripture?

Are you giving of your resources to serve the church and the Kingdom of God? Have you increased the percentage of your giving, or have you reached a tithe of your income to God?

Have you found a meaningful way to serve, to put your God-given gifts to use to help somebody, to help the church or community? Are you expressing your faith in some meaningful way?

As you look at your life over the last year, what is your discipleship trajectory? The risen Christ calls us to rise up to the challenge of discipleship. Where you are doing that, praise God! Where you're not, maybe it's time for a little ascension in your life.

The final scene of Luke's Gospel is almost sad, it is so beautiful. It is at least poignant. Having given his disciples their final instructions—that his resurrection was real, that the suffering of the cross was necessary and planned, that they were to be witnesses of all these things—Jesus led the disciples out to Bethany. This was the same road he had come down just eight days before when he entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey. You could still imagine the echoes, "Hosanna! Hosanna to the Son of David!" So much had happened since then. When they got to the top of the Mount of Olives, overlooking the Holy City, Jesus turned to his closest friends, lifted up his hands, and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he was lifted up and taken away into heaven. Did he just disappear, like he did at table in Emmaus? Or was it a long, slow rising until he was enveloped in the clouds? We don't know. But what do you do with that? One thing for sure: you don't have an argument about the mechanics of the thing. The disciples just worshipped. They walked back into Jerusalem, but they didn't go home (which would have been understandable after the day they had had). They went straight to the Temple and continued praising God with great joy, blessing God, and telling the story of Jesus.

And so it came full circle. The story that began in the Temple with an angel appearing to Zechariah to announce the birth of John now ended in the Temple with the disciples praising God, waiting for a power yet to come, for when it came, it would set them and the world on fire.

¹ Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1935), 88.

² Luke 24:36-40.

³ Thomas A. Miller, MD, "Did Jesus Really Rise from the Dead?" (Crossway, 2013), pp. 133-136.

⁴ Luke 24:44-47.

⁵ Romans 8:28.

⁶ Luke 24:47-49.

⁷ William Barclay, *The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians*, Rev. Ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), pp. 93f.

⁸ Attributed to Teresa of Avila, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/66880-christ-has-no-body-now-but-yours-no-hands-no>.