

Seventh Sunday of Easter -- The Ascension of Our Lord	(May 24, 2020)	1853
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Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come!

Luke 24:44-53

Jesus said to his disciples, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."

Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer!

Dear disciples of our ascended Lord,

What do you do to pass the time on a rainy day? What do you do to pass the time when you have a four hour lay-over at an airport? What do you do to pass the time while waiting at the doctor's office? What do you do to pass the time during a lock-down when you can't go anywhere or visit anyone, and no one can come and visit you? What do you do when life itself seems to be a matter of merely passing time? When, even though you may be very busy, you still get the feeling that you're just putting in time, going day after day, with no real purpose, no real motivation, and no real satisfaction?

What do you think Jesus' disciples did to pass the time as they were hiding out behind locked doors for fear of the Jews after Jesus was crucified? I don't think their lives were too fulfilling at that point. They were afraid and confused. They didn't know why they were in that situation, why Jesus had been taken from them. They didn't know what the purpose for their lives was anymore. They didn't know what to do with their lives. They had no incentive, no motivation to do anything. They were just putting in time.

At the beginning of chapter 24 in Luke, we find the disciples as depressed as they could be with life. But by the end of that same chapter we find those same disciples to be

the happiest, most joyful, most excited people on earth. The last two verses in Luke tell us, "Then the disciples worshiped Jesus and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God." What was it that made such a difference in their lives? The risen Jesus came to those disciples and did three things for them. I. Jesus opened their minds so that they could understand the Scriptures. II. Jesus gave them a most important job to do. And III. Jesus left them and was taken up into heaven. Jesus' Ascension Motivates His Disciples.

When Jesus rose from the dead, he didn't simply disappear from the earth into the glories of heaven. He could have. His work of redemption was complete. But his disciples didn't understand. They were confused, afraid, sad and in despair. Jesus graciously appeared to them numerous times over a period of forty days, and "showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive." As Luke tells us in the book of Acts. Jesus' purpose in these appearances was not only to prove to his disciples that he was alive, but also to give them some much needed instruction, so that they would understand. Jesus said to his disciples, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem."

Jesus opened their minds so that they could understand the Scriptures. And how did Jesus open their minds? By explaining to them the Scriptures; the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms. Those are the three basic parts of the Old Testament. Moses wrote the first five books: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. That's the Law of Moses. The Prophets are those books of the Old Testament that usually bear the name of the prophet who wrote them; books like Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah and so on, and also the historical books like first and second Samuel, first and second Kings, and first and second Chronicles. The third group contained the rest of the books, the poetic books like Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs. Psalms was the first and longest book in this section, and so the entire group was referred to as the Psalms. Book by book, Jesus showed the disciples how the Old Testament clearly foretold the Savior, what he would do, and what would happen to him; that the Christ would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day. The Old Testament proclaims the promises of the Savior, while the New Testament proclaims the perfect and complete fulfillment of those many promises in Jesus. The central message of both Old and New Testaments is the same--repentance and forgiveness of sins in that Savior's name, by that Savior's suffering and rising from the dead.

Jesus reminded his disciples, "This is what I told you while I was still with you. Jesus was no longer with his disciples in a continuous visible bodily form, as he had been before his suffering and death. His resurrection appearances were exceptional. But already before his suffering and death, Jesus had many times explained the Scriptures to his disciples, that he would have to suffer, die and rise from the dead, as the Scriptures clearly foretold.

Those disciples should not have been afraid, confused and in despair about Jesus' suffering and death. They were familiar with the Old Testament Scriptures. They had heard Jesus explain these things how many times during the past three years! But they

were slow learners, and it was left until after Jesus had risen from the dead for their minds to be opened so they could understand the Scriptures. Once they understood the Scriptures, they were no longer sad, confused, and afraid. They were filled with thankfulness and joy that Jesus had suffered, died and risen again, winning their salvation.

When we are saddened or confused with life, when we seem to have no motivation or purpose, then we also need to turn to the Scriptures and let Jesus open our minds to understand that he suffered, died and rose again for us! The Scriptures alone give our lives meaning, purpose and motivation. Sometimes we might wonder why people aren't motivated, aren't motivated to worship Christ, to serve him day by day in all they do, and to do his work of proclaiming his gracious gospel to others. The reason is simply because they don't really understand the Scriptures. They may understand the words and the events of Scripture, but somehow it just doesn't have any real meaning to them. By ourselves none of us can truly understand the Scriptures. May the Holy Spirit ever open our minds through God's word, and make it meaningful in every aspect of our lives.

Once they understood the Scriptures, then the disciples were ready, willing and eager to serve Jesus with their lives, and Jesus graciously gave them a most important job to do. He told them, "You are witnesses of these things." They were witnesses of Jesus' perfect life, his miracles, his preaching, his suffering, death, and resurrection; witnesses to the fact that Jesus had fulfilled Scripture perfectly. A witness testifies to what he has seen, and that was now the job of the disciples, to tell others that Jesus is the Savior, to testify to others how Jesus had won their salvation.

Jesus told them, "This is what is written: Repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in the Savior's name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem." By proclaiming the gospel to others, those disciples would have a part in fulfilling Scripture, fulfilling the many passages that speak of God's word being preached to the nations. They were to begin at Jerusalem, the very place where Jesus' earthly ministry had come to an end, and from there they were to go to all nations with the gospel. In Matthew 28 we hear Jesus' great ascension command, "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."

Jesus also promises to equip his disciples for this grand task by giving them the Holy Spirit. He promises, "I am going to send you what my Father has promised; (namely the Holy Spirit) but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

Jesus has given us this same most important job to do, to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins in his name to all nations. We are witnesses of the salvation Jesus won, not eye-witnesses in the same sense as those first disciples were. But they have proclaimed God's word to us in the Bible, and through that word, we are just as sure and certain witnesses as they. As Christians, we truly want to serve Jesus, and what a privilege it is that Jesus has given us this most important of all tasks. How totally empty life would be apart from serving Christ and proclaiming his word. Apart from that there would be no purpose for our lives, and there would be no purpose for our church. Our church exists for one purpose, to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins in Jesus' name to all nations. And each of us exists for that one purpose also. What a blessing it is

that we are not all alone in this work, but that we can gather with other Christians in our congregation, and together do the Lord's work. What a blessing it is that our congregation is not all alone, but that we have a synod of many congregations with which we can work together to proclaim the gospel to the ends of the earth. By ourselves our congregation would have difficulty opening new mission congregations around our country, and supporting foreign missionaries. But when we work together with others as a synod, we have the privilege of participating in this exciting and all-important work, the greatest and most glorious work on earth, the work that Jesus gave us all to do, to proclaim repentance and forgiveness in his name to all nations.

"When Jesus had led his disciples out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God." Jesus gave his disciples their job, and then left them. Now at first that doesn't sound too encouraging or motivating, does it? Give someone a job and then take off. But the disciples found it encouraging. They worshiped Jesus, even though they couldn't see him anymore. They then returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they stayed continually at the temple, praising God. Jesus' ascension motivated his disciples. It was not as though he had totally left them. It was only his visible presence that was gone. They would no longer see him, but he would still be with them as he had promised, "I will be with you always, to the very end of the age."

Jesus' ascension assured those disciples, and it assures us of many things. It demonstrates once again that Jesus is victorious over sin, death and the devil, and shows that he is Lord of lords, ruler over all things in heaven and on earth, governing all things for the eternal good of us his people. Christ's ascension assures us that he is in heaven, pleading with God the Father on our behalf, constantly begging the Father to forgive our many sins, because he paid the full price for all of them on the cross. Jesus' ascension also assures us that he has prepared a place for us in heaven, and that just as his first disciples saw him go into heaven, we will see him come again from heaven on the Last Day, to take us to be with him there, where we will have exalted, glorified bodies like his, and reign with him for all eternity. What motivation Jesus' ascension gives us to serve him each day of our lives.

Luke began his gospel at the temple in Jerusalem, with Zechariah the priest burning incense to the Lord. Remember how the angel came to Zechariah there in the temple and told him that he would have a son, John the Baptist, who would be the Savior's for-runner. So Luke also ends his gospel at that same temple in Jerusalem, with the disciples praising God. For God had sent that Savior who had now completely carried out their salvation, and given their lives meaning and purpose for all eternity.

Amen.

Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever! Amen.