

## Jesus Left – Now What?

Luke 24:50-53

Let's begin with reading our text in Luke 24:50-53.

Today we come to the conclusion of our study in the Gospel of Luke and as we end this series we must note that the topic of this passage is one that by and large the church has neglected. There are few sermons and songs about it.

4<sup>th</sup> century church Father Augustine has referred to this doctrine as an absolute necessity. What I am referring to the ascension. Augustine wrote "Unless the Savior had ascended into heaven His nativity would have come to nothing and His passion (death) would have born no fruit for us and His most holy resurrection would have been useless." While it does not save it does provide some assurances. Hence its importance.

Allistair Begg has described the ascension as a neglected essential Christian doctrine.

At Christmas we focus on His advent. At Easter we focus on His death and resurrection. In between those dates we look at aspects of the Christian life as we glean from both the Old and New Testament principles that will help us in daily living. For a variety of reasons we just don't talk much about the ascension. If this is a time to confess I don't ever remember delivering a message on the ascension aside from giving it a quick look when it pops up in the text. When we do discuss the ascension it's more related to the message and the mission given by Jesus to the disciples to go into all the world and preach the gospel or we talk about His return.

Not only are there few messages about the ascension, there are few songs or hymns about it. If you look in the back of our hymnal there is a section titled Christ's ascension, but they deal more with His resurrection or His reign in heaven.

I googled the ascension and found a hymn written by Saint Bede who lived around the 6<sup>th</sup> century. It was in a Lutheran hymnal. The hymn looks at the events of the ascension from the book of Acts. It's titled A Hymn of Glory Let Us Sing. (See #63 to the tune of All Creatures of Our God and King)

A hymn of glory let us sing  
New songs throughout the world shall ring  
Alleluia, Alleluia.  
Christ, by a road before untrod  
Ascendeth to the throne of God.  
Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia.

The holy apostolic band  
Upon the Mount of Olives stand  
Alleluia, Alleluia.  
And with His followers they see  
Jesus' resplendent majesty  
Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia.

To Whom the angels drawing nigh,  
"Why stand and gaze upon the sky?"  
Alleluia, Alleluia.  
"This is the Savior," thus they say.  
"This is His noble triumph day."  
Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia.

"Again ye shall behold Him so,  
As ye have today seen Him go."  
Alleluia, Alleluia.  
"In glorious pomp ascending high  
Up to the portals of the sky."  
Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia.

O grant us thitherward to tend  
And with unwearied hearts ascend,  
Alleluia, Alleluia.  
Unto Thy kingdom's throne, where Thou  
As is our faith, art seated now,  
Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia.

Be Thou our Joy and strong Defense,  
Who art our future Recompense,  
Alleluia, Alleluia.  
So shall the light that springs from Thee  
Be ours through all eternity,  
Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia.

O risen Christ, ascended Lord,  
 All praise to Thee let earth accord,  
 Alleluia, Alleluia.  
 Who art, while endless ages run,  
 With Father and with Spirit One,  
 Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia.

In concluding this series and considering the ascension let's ponder three points.

The activity of the Lord  
 The actions of the disciples  
 The assurance for the believer

## I. THE ACTIVITY OF THE LORD – vs. 50-51

Last weekend we went and watched the movie Risen that is out in theaters. It was loosely based on the events starting from the crucifixion to the ascension. It's about the search for the missing Jesus by Roman soldiers. The tribune leading the search ends up following the disciples to Galilee where they meet Jesus who walks off into the sunset. They got that part wrong.

According to our text and comparing it with Acts 1, we find that Jesus and the disciples were in the vicinity of Bethany on the Mt. of Olives which lay between Jerusalem and Bethany. Bethany was about 2 miles from Jerusalem and the road between the two took them through the Mt. of Olives a very familiar place to Jesus and the place where He was betrayed by Judas. Luke's Gospel and his account in Acts do not contradict one another when one says they were near Bethany and the other states that they returned to Jerusalem from the Mt. of Olives which was about a Sabbath's day journey. That distance is estimated to be between  $\frac{1}{2}$  and  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile.

Let's notice the activity of the Lord in this final meeting with His disciples. If you remember things a little better by having them alliterated the three activities, if you are using the NIV, all begin with the letter "L". If you are using the KJV or the ESV it's not as tidy. They have two "L"s and a "P".

Some of you will no doubt take a mental diversion and be inclined to look for those three activities. So to save you the trouble of searching, let me give them to you straight away so you can put your mind at ease. They are led, lifted, and left. There you have it.

So the first thing we note in our text about the activity of Jesus is that He led them out.

### A. He Led Them Out – v. 50a

Two things immediately come to mind. The first is from Psalm 23 speaking of the shepherd and the various essential responsibilities in caring for sheep. Psalm 23

If sheep wanted their needs met, they had to follow where the shepherd led them. He had their best interest as the focus of his heart.

I think the question to ask here is this: If the Lord is leading, are we following?

Following implies obedience.

Following implies willingness.

Following implies desire, a choice.

Following implies a surrender of my will for the will of the one I am now choosing to follow.

Our text doesn't say, but I wonder what the disciples were thinking. They had been following Jesus for over three years now and maybe they thought it was going to be like old times. Even though on separate occasions Jesus had informed them that He was going to leave them (John 13/14) and also that it was necessary for Him to go so that the Comforter, the Holy Spirit could come and empower them, I'm not sure they thought it was going to be that day or any time soon. After all, it had been 40 days since the resurrection. Perhaps they thought it was going to be like any other day – more teaching and miracles.

In a sense He did teach them when He gave them

instructions to carry the gospel to the ends of the world empowered by the Holy Spirit. And He did perform a miracle when He ascended into heaven. “He led them out.”

Let me ask you again: if Jesus is leading are you following even when you don't know the path He is taking or where it is going? That's a bit scary for us because we want a plan, we want details, we want to know the schedule from beginning to end.

What's the end goal?

What's it going to cost me?

How long will it take?

It's uncomfortable for us to go someplace without knowing the how's, the why's and the what for's.

Verses like Proverbs 3:5-6 can be a bit unnerving. How do we follow someone we have never seen or physically talked to before?

Why should we trust the Lord with all our heart?

We trust Him because He is faithful, He has never gone back on His word, He has our best interest at heart and there are promises for faithful following.

So when we come to a simple sign on life's road that says “This is the way, walk ye in it” we can rest assured that if we are following Christ that is the path He means for us to take if we would follow obediently.

I said this reminded me of a couple of things. I thought immediately of Psalm 23 and at the same time a hymn came to mind. As a matter of fact there are several hymns we could note.

Where He Leads Me I Will Follow (#593)

Wherever He Leads I'll Go (#598)

I Have Decided to Follow Jesus (#602)

But the hymn that struck a chord in my heart was this: He Leadeth Me (#690)

1. He leadeth me: O blessed thought!  
O words with heavenly comfort fraught!  
Whate'er I do, where'er I be,  
still 'tis God's hand that leadeth me.

Refrain:

He leadeth me, he leadeth me,  
by his own hand he leadeth me;  
his faithful follower I would be,  
for by his hand he leadeth me.

2. Sometimes mid scenes of deepest gloom,  
sometimes where Eden's bowers bloom,  
by waters still, o'er troubled sea,  
still 'tis his hand that leadeth me.

(Refrain) *(Not in our hymnal)*

3. Lord, I would place my hand in thine,  
nor ever murmur nor repine;  
content, whatever lot I see,  
since 'tis my God that leadeth me.

(Refrain)

4. And when my task on earth is done,  
when by thy grace the victory's won,  
e'en death's cold wave I will not flee,  
since God through Jordan leadeth me.

(Refrain)

We can make an assumption that if He led them out, they followed: obediently, willingly, with desire and full surrender.

I hope you don't mind if I ask you once more: if Jesus is leading the way, are you following?

He led them out is His first activity.

The second activity is that He lifted His hands.

B. He Lifted His Hands – v. 50b

Jesus is now going to act as our High Priest. He raised His hands and He offered a blessing over them. We don't know what all was included in the blessing. It could have been a summary of all he had promised them. Holy Spirit, the promise of eternal life for faith in Him, the promise of His return, the promise of their presence with Him in glory someday.

It could have been simply the blessing given in the Old Testament, Numbers 6:24-26.

“The Lord bless you and keep you;  
The Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you;  
The Lord turn His face toward you and give you peace.”

A blessing is the bestowal of good on someone else. In the Garden of Eden God blessed Adam and Eve. He told them to be fruitful and increase in number and to have rule over all living creatures (Genesis 1:28).

It was a blessing of authority and to increase in kind. Jesus gave the disciples His authority to preach and make disciples and to increase the kingdom of God by proclaiming the good news of salvation.

With His blessing they had no reason to be discouraged.

Notice, if you will, the third activity of Jesus. We find it in verse 51.

### C. He Left Them – v. 51

The tense of the Greek indicates that this blessing went on for some time: “While He was blessing them...”

It was in the very act of blessing them that He began His ascent into heaven and they watched. While He was blessing them, He left them.

Someone shared with me not too long ago about a comedian they had heard talk about coming from Kansas. There are plenty of jokes about how flat Kansas is. This comedian shared that where he lived was so flat, they watched their dog run away from home for two weeks.

We don’t know how long the disciples stood there gazing into the sky watching the Lord rise higher

and higher while His figure got smaller and smaller. It must have been for an extended period of time because Luke records for us in Acts that as they stood looking intently in the sky watching, two men dressed in white, which we can only assume were angels, asked the disciples how much longer they were going to stand there craning to see and getting a neck ache to boot. They informed them in so many words the same thing Jesus told them in John 14 that He would return in the same way. It will not be some mystical body or as a spirit being, but in a physical, bodily form. As they saw Him leave would be how He would return.

Now you may be asking yourself but if not let me put this question in your head: since Jesus left a little over two thousand years ago, what has He been doing? I’m glad you asked.

1. He is ruling over the universe  
Hebrews 1:3, 8

Some folks might look around and come to believe one of three things based on what they see going on around the world today. With all the natural and man-made disasters, the atrocities that mankind inflicts on each other it appears that as a ruler He is incompetent, impotent, or indifferent. He either doesn’t care, doesn’t have the power to right the wrongs, or is too far away to be effective.

Paul reminds us from the letter to the Colossians that “by Him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or power or rulers or authorities; all things were created by Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.” (1:16-17)

Regardless of what some people claim, He is ruling the universe, even as we speak.

2. He is ruling over the church

Colossians 1:18 “And He is the head of the body, the church; He is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything He might have the supremacy.”

Ephesians 1:22-23 “And God placed all things under His feet and appointed Him to be head over everything for the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills everything in every way.”

If He is the ruler are we letting Him rule us as His body?

3. He is our sympathetic High Priest  
Hebrews 4:15

He enters into our struggles and sympathizes with our weaknesses. He knows what we are going through. The Apostle Peter puts it so plainly – “He cares for you.” (I Peter 5:7)

How important it is for us to remember that we do not walk this earth alone, we do not go through trials alone, we do not bear our burdens alone. Psalm 23:4 “Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me.”

A sympathetic High Priest not only knows what we are going through, He “will never leave us or forsake us.” (Hebrew 13:5)

4. He is interceding for us

Romans 8:34 “Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.”

Hebrews 9:24 “For Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; He entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God’s presence.”

Hebrews 7:24-25

Christ stands before God on our behalf bringing to Him our requests and when we are condemned by the enemy, He stands as our defense attorney telling the Father that He died for us. He is our intercessor.

5. He is preparing a place for us

John 14:2b “I am going to prepare a place for you.”

Keith Green once said that if this place only took 6 days to create and heaven is taking 2000 years then we’re living in a garbage can compared to what’s going on up there. It will be beyond beautiful.

So you may be wondering about another question. Was the ascension necessary? Couldn’t He have just vanished? Yes to both.

First the ascension signified that the work Christ was given in redemption was accepted by the Father for sin. He could then return to the Father where He is now seated at the right hand of God indicating the authority He has. Being seated signifies that His work is done.

Second, the ascension guarantees our heavenly home and indicates the way by which we also will enter heaven.

“For the Lord Himself will come down from heaven (there’s the promise given by the two angels when Jesus ascended), with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.” (There’s the promise of Christ to be with Him forever) I Thessalonians 4:16-17

If you want a good study sometime, examine what Scripture says about clouds. Clouds symbolize the presence of God. For the Israelites the cloud was a

symbol of His guidance and presence in the wilderness. It was in a cloud that God's covenant promise was given to Noah through a rainbow. It is by a cloud that the Lord will return and into which we will be assembled for that final transformation and transportation into heaven.

The ascension was necessary for so many reasons. That is the activity of the Lord. We find then the actions of the disciples.

## II. THE ACTIONS OF THE DISCIPLES – vs. 52-53

The last thing He did was bless them.  
The first thing they did was worship Him.

### A. They Had An Obedient Heart – v. 51

#### 1. They worshipped

It is here that we see when Christ was taken up that their hearts were filled with wonder and awe and reverence and they worshipped Him. Christ had made everything clear to them.

Their message was clear – they were to proclaim the saving grace of God through the death, burial and resurrection of Christ.

Their mission was clear – they were to preach to the whole world salvation alone in Christ.

Their means was clear – they would be empowered to proclaim that news through the Holy Spirit.

The response of watching Him leave is much different than just before His crucifixion when He announced to them that He would be leaving them and they became fearful. He had to tell them not to worry. But here He gives no admonition, only a blessing and they responded in worship. Worship is a direct response of a heart that sees what God is doing.

Sometimes I fear when we see God work and we remain unmoved. Our response should be like the disciples and offer worship for what God is doing.

In following Christ and claiming His promises, there wasn't anything to fear. We cannot worship God when fear is present. But when fear is absent the natural response is joy, celebration, worship.

They had an obedient heart that worshipped.  
They had an obedient will.

### B. They Had An Obedient Will – v. 52

#### 1. They walked – v. 52a

Luke and Acts tell us that they returned to Jerusalem. It was there that Jesus had instructed them to wait for the Holy Spirit. And so they returned in obedience. Peter didn't go back to his fishing. Matthew didn't return to collecting tax. Simon didn't take up the banner of a zealot again. They returned to Jerusalem. They walked.

#### 2. They waited – v. 52b

Out of obedience to the Lord this band of men who before had been anxious, scattered, doubtful, fearful now were galvanized into a group of men committed to the message and mission of the One who had left them with this great task of spreading the good news. So they returned to wait for what Christ had promised them – the Holy Spirit. Their world was about to change.

We have pondered the activity of the Lord and the actions of the disciples, let me briefly address the assurance in the ascension.

## III. THE ASSURANCE FOR THE BELIEVER – I Thessalonians 4:16-18

We touched on this passage a few moments ago, but there are two truths I want to highlight for you.

### A. We Must Consider His Promise – vs. 16-17

In John 14 Jesus made that promise of His return



very clear and Paul affirmed that promise in the same way described by the two angels when Jesus left. There will be that grand reunion in the air when those believers who have already died are joined with those who remain.

Milton and Leona are going to catch up.

Everett is going to chase after Arlie.

I'll see my Mom walking again.

You will see friends and loved ones who were believers in Christ who have already passed on.

His ascension means our presence with the Lord is assured and it will be forever.

We are unfortunately neck deep in the political cycle with a lot of rhetoric being made about promises that can't be kept.

You might ask me to help you move tomorrow and I'll tell you I'll be there, but something can come up that precludes me from keeping my word. But not Jesus. When the Father says it's time to go get your people, there isn't anything that will impede Him from keeping His promise.

Consider His promise.

Let that bring joy.

Let that bring worship.

Let that bring comfort.

There is one final truth to note.

## B. We Must Comfort His People – v. 18

Wondering about when the Lord will return can cause us to be a bit worried. It seems like He's taking a long time. Some might even think He changed His mind about coming back or about getting them.

We can look down the road at the future with the way things are going in our country and in the world and it doesn't look very good so we can become fearful. We are to comfort one another with the promise of Christ's return. He made the promise that if He went He would come back.

Jesus left, now what? Until that day when He does come back we have two responses – to worship Him and witness for Him. To do both we must begin by following Him where He is leading. Accept the mission of taking His message empowered by the Holy Spirit to many who have yet to hear about and believe in Christ, the risen and returning Savior.