

FULL CIRCLE

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Luke 24:36-53

Today we come to the end of the Gospel According to Luke. For the past year I have preached 47 sermons from this gospel. I started at the beginning and moved chapter by chapter to the very end. I undertook this as a project as part of the Doctor of Ministry program that I am enrolled in. This was an experiment in preaching and worship and from it I have learned far more than I ever expected. I cannot tell you how much I appreciate your sticking with me through all this. I was fully prepared, at any point in the year, if the project didn't seem to be working, to end it. This was never meant to be a prison sentence for any of us. But today, we come to the end. Next week, as a palate cleanser, we will delve into the ancient words of the prophet Isaiah.

On the church's calendar, today is known as Christ the King Sunday. It is the last Sunday of the church's liturgical year. Next week is the First Sunday of Advent—the beginning of a new church year. It was last Advent that we started our journey into Luke. Beginning next Sunday, we will have four weeks of Advent, then Christmas, then Epiphany, Lent, Holy week, Easter, and so on—the church calendar—all the way around the circle.

Christ the King Sunday—the one we celebrate today—at the end of the year, serves to remind us that Christ is king. However, because of where we are in Luke's Gospel, we are today reading the account of Jesus' ascension into heaven. Normally, we would read this story on Ascension Sunday, which takes place several weeks after Easter. So today, we are observing both Christ the King and Ascension Sundays and it is oddly appropriate. These two days do not cancel one another out. In fact, they complement one another. Jesus ascends into heaven where he sits as king at God's right hand.

In our reading for today, we are looking at the third resurrection story. The first was the story of the empty tomb, how, early on the first day, the women go to the tomb to complete the burial preparations on Jesus' corpse. At the tomb, they discover that the body is missing and there are two angels there to ask them why they are looking for the living among the dead. The women return to the rest of the group and tell them what they had seen but their story was rejected as being too preposterous.

The second post-resurrection story is the one that takes place later that day on the road to Emmaus. Two more of Jesus' followers are traveling away from Jerusalem when they are joined by a stranger. The stranger is Jesus but for some reason they are kept from recognizing him. They tell this stranger what has

happened in Jerusalem over the past couple of days and then he begins to instruct them about the Old Testament telling of Moses and the prophets and how the words of scripture point toward the Messiah. Over a meal at the end of the day, the stranger breaks bread and shares it with them and the two finally recognize Jesus. Jesus disappears and the two rush back to Jerusalem to tell the others.

Our reading today is the third post-resurrection story and it appears to take place on the evening of that same day. The disciples and followers are gathered in Jerusalem. They are discussing what has happened that day when suddenly Jesus himself is standing there among them. Jesus greets them saying, *Peace be with you*. This, of course, scares everyone out of their wits because, after all, this must be a ghost speaking to them. That is the only explanation.

Jesus asks 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 he showed them his hands and his feet presumably to show the wounds from his crucifixion. Then, in one of the great moments in this gospel, Luke says, *in their joy they were disbelieving*. Jesus requests something to eat. They give him some fish and he eats it. This is not something that ghosts do.

Then Jesus does the same thing that he did with the two traveling to Emmaus, he begins to interpret the scriptures. He reminds them of the Law of Moses and the words of the prophets and the psalms, and how in him, all of this is fulfilled. Luke tells us that in the process of teaching, Jesus *opened their minds to understand the scriptures*. Jesus reiterates what he has told them before, that the Messiah must suffer and die and rise from the dead, and *that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem*. To all this, tells them, they are witnesses.

Finally, he instructs them to stay in the city until they *have been clothed with power from on high*—in other words, until the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit would come to them.

Lastly, Jesus leads the group out of the city to the Mount of Olives, as far as the village of Bethany. Once there, he lifts up his hands in a blessing. As he does so, he is carried up into heaven.

Jesus is gone. But this time, instead of giving up and going home, the disciples and the others give thanks and return to Jerusalem. They stay there, spending their time in the temple worshiping and blessing God.

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With this final passage, the Gospel of Luke comes full circle. The book ends in the very place that it begins—in the temple in Jerusalem.

At the beginning of this gospel, Luke offers an introduction—a dedication to Theophilus. The reader is then introduced to a Zechariah, a priest attending to his duties in the temple. While he is there an angel appears to inform him that his wife Elizabeth will have a son that they will name John. We will know him as John the Baptist.

John will be born. Jesus will be born. Jesus' parents will bring him to the temple for his dedication. Simeon and Anna will prophesy that the child will usher in the salvation of his people.

When Jesus is 12, his parents accidentally leave him in Jerusalem. They find him three days later at the temple holding court with the priests and rabbis. At the end of the gospel, Jesus returns to Jerusalem and teaches in the temple.

For Luke, more than any other of the gospel writers, the temple is central to the life and worship of Israel. It is the center of Jewish life. It is the throne of God. Luke concludes his gospel with the followers of Jesus in the temple worshiping and giving praise. It is fitting then that Luke would teach these things to his congregation. After all it is central to their being followers of Jesus.

But there is only one glitch—the temple no longer exists. The temple was destroyed in the year 70 AD by the Romans—at least 10 years before Luke brings us his gospel. The disciples may have worshiped in the temple, but for Luke's people now the temple is something else. With Jesus' death and resurrection, they are no longer limited to one building in Jerusalem; the idea of a temple now encompasses much more.

The temple at the beginning of Luke was a closed place open only to the priests. Zechariah was working alone when the angel appeared to him. At the end of the gospel, at the moment of Jesus' death, the curtain in the temple which separated the innermost Holy of Holies was torn in two. The temple is now opened to *all nations*. The worship of God is no longer confined to a small space controlled by a small number of people. The temple has been freed.

Jesus warned his followers what would happen to him. In chapter 9 he says, *The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised* (9:21). Just as Jesus was crucified at the hands of the Romans, the temple suffers the same fate—it too is destroyed by the Romans. Remember how Jesus foretells the destruction of the temple [in chapter 21] when he says, *The days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down* (21:6). Although the temple has been destroyed, the worship of God lives on just as Jesus lives. As Luke teaches his people, God is greater than any building and any body. Buildings will fall and bodies will die, but the word of the endures forever (Isa 40:8).

This is Luke's message of hope to his people—that the temple is everywhere. It is also a commissioning as he will send his people out to the world to teach *all nations.*"

Luke brings us full circle from Zechariah worshiping in the temple to the disciples doing the same. And yet in this final scene we find not just great joy but great anticipation of the marvelous things that are going to happen.