

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **What Are You Longing For?**

Luke 24:36-53

At the beginning of today's Scripture passage, Jesus appears. Near the end, he disappears. In between Jesus' entrance and exit, a lot happens. Some disruption and some peace. Some fear and some joy. Some doubt and some faith. Some hunger and some satisfaction. There's even a generous portion of Bible study and proclamation, topped off with a promise about a divine outpouring that's on its way. In other words, it won't be long until power from on high makes its way down low.

But as for now, Jesus' disciples need to stay put in Jerusalem. And while they're preparing to stay put, here on earth, Jesus is preparing to make his move, to heaven. In the closing section of this morning's text, Luke briefly narrates the ascension. Jesus leads his disciples out to Bethany and blesses them. As Jesus is blessing them, Luke says, "he left them and was taken up into heaven" (v. 51).

Naturally, we try to imagine what that experience was like. We try to picture it in our minds. It reminds me of a seminary that had an annual ritual celebrating Ascension Day. Deans, faculty, and clergy got all dressed in their worship vestments, and began processing into the chapel. As the procession came around the corner, led by the president of the school, a student who was crouching behind the shrubs lit the fuse to a rocket. Attached to the rocket was a plastic, life-size figure of Jesus, the kind you might see in a Christmas display in someone's front yard. The makeshift missile soared out of the rhododendron through smoke and sparks, and did a nose dive onto the roof of a nearby dormitory.<sup>1</sup>

That's one way to proclaim that Jesus is Lord. Another way might be the side of your vehicle. I remember sitting at an intersection when a vendor truck passed by declaring the good news. On the side of the truck was the basic Christian confession, "Jesus is Lord." And underneath that, some more down to earth matters: "Chips, Sodas, Sandwiches, Snacks." It reminded me of some other vehicles I've seen that announce the gospel while also offering to replace your windows, paint your house, or install new carpeting.

When Luke closes his Gospel with the declaration that Jesus is Lord, he doesn't use rockets or auto decals. He simply tells the story of how Jesus appeared to his followers, gave them his blessing, and departed to heaven. It's a very condensed description of what God has done, and what is still to come.

And that's where we contemporary disciples still live, in between Jesus' resurrection and his return. We believe that Jesus is seated at the right hand of God the Father, that the righteous reign of God, through the Messiah, has begun. And yet, we still wait, actively and faithfully, for the full revealing of God's reign when Jesus comes again. We believe that through his atoning death, Jesus has secured the forgiveness of our sins and launched a new humanity that we enter by faith. And yet, even after we come into the kingdom of God through trust in Christ, we still look ahead, anticipating the fulfillment of God's promises and our complete transformation into the likeness of our Savior.

While we wait, we worship. It's not just a way for us to pass the time until the kingdom comes. No, worship is how we confess that Jesus is living and reigning, with God. It's how we praise the God revealed in Jesus. Notice that in our text, after he was taken away to heaven, the first act of Jesus' disciples is to worship him. Now remember that these are pious Jews, who know that God alone is to be worshiped. So when they bow down in adoration to Jesus, they don't believe they're violating their commitment to the one true God. They're simply acknowledging that who God is can't be separated from who Jesus is.

As Christians, we can't talk about God without talking about Jesus. Jesus is the way that God has come to us, in flesh and blood, to save us. Jesus is God, embodied, with us and for us. And when Jesus ascends, it doesn't mean that God is no longer with us. It doesn't mean that after his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus somehow sheds his humanity, as if it were just a costume he's been wearing for the duration of his mission, and now he can finally ascend as pure divinity back to heaven. No, in our Scripture passage we see that the risen Jesus who appears to his disciples still has a body, though now transformed, and still bears the marks of his crucifixion.

This is the Jesus who knows what it means to be human. This is the Jesus who knows hunger, thirst, loneliness, temptation, trials, sorrows, suffering, and even death itself. This is the Jesus who has been on this earth, in this world, living this life, from the inside, not just watching our plight from the outside, safe and secure within a heavenly fortress. Jesus is God with us, not just for a few years during his earthly ministry, but forever. This is the Jesus who lifts up his wounded hands and blesses his flesh and blood disciples before taking his place at the right hand of the Father.

And when he ascends, there is a sense in which we're left behind. But there's also a sense in which he is with us, and we are with him. For it's through his death that we have access to the presence of God. It's through him, bearing the weight of our sins, enduring the penalty of our disobedience, that we are forgiven and are able to enter into and participate in the holiness of God. I like the way that Barbara Brown Taylor puts it when she writes:

By presenting his own ruined, risen body to be seated at the right hand of God, Jesus imported flesh and blood into those holy precincts for the first time. He paved the way for us, so that when we arrive there later everyone will not be quite so shocked by us. He restored the goodness of creation, and ours in particular. By ascending bodily into heaven, he showed us that flesh and blood are good, not bad; that they are good enough for Jesus, good enough for heaven, good enough for God. By putting them on and keeping them on, Jesus has not only brought God to us; he has also brought us to God.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus paves the way for us to come into the presence of God. That's what we do when we gather for worship. We continue the praising that those first disciples began when Jesus was taken into heaven. Recall that in the first two chapters of Luke's Gospel, we were taken to the Temple, where we met Zechariah, Simeon, Anna, and the gathering of God's people. And now, at the conclusion of Luke's story, we're brought back to the Temple, where he says the disciples stayed continually, praising God. So the story ends where it began, in the place of meeting between God and his people.

For us, that's who Jesus is. Jesus is the place where heaven and earth meet, the place where we experience the divine glory and participate in the very life and power of God. And we come here trusting that Jesus is present. His ascension tells us that he's not confined to one particular place on the map, during one particular period of history, but that he's here with us now, and that we can meet him anywhere. Now for some people, that's a reason not to come to church. If I can meet with Jesus at my kitchen table, in my family room, or at the local coffee shop, why worry about going to a house of worship? But in reality, Jesus' ascension is the reason to gather with his disciples, because here in the fellowship of his

followers is where the risen and ascended Jesus has promised to be. We come here because he is with us.

And yet, his ascension also reminds us that he has departed from us. In other words, Jesus isn't just present. He's also absent. He ascended to heaven, and though he's with us now through the Spirit, we're still waiting for his return, and the full revelation of his presence. In fact, the way he is present with us now is what makes us long to have him with us more fully. No wonder those first disciples were at the Temple, continually praising God. What they had been longing for had happened. Through Jesus, God had come to deliver his people and to set things right in the world. But those disciples still had some longing to do, some longing that wouldn't be satisfied until Jesus came again.

I hope you came to church hungry today. And I'm not just talking about the fellowship meal following today's service. I'm talking about the need to come here each Sunday and be spiritually fed. I want you to feel satisfied when you leave this house of worship. I want you to feel like something you were longing for has been fulfilled. But I want even more. I want our congregational worship to not only satisfy your longing, but also to create an even deeper longing in you. I want you to not only feel like you've been fed, but also to have a growing appetite for the presence of God in Christ.

I say this because we're still in that same location where Jesus' first disciples found themselves, namely, in between Christ's first coming and his second coming. Living between the beginning of the reign of God and the completion of the reign of God. Occupying this space between what already is and what's yet to come. That's why our life as the church is a life of longing. A life of yearning for the fullness of God's presence and the complete unveiling of his glory. As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, "We go to church to worship, to acknowledge the Lord's absence and to seek the Lord's presence, to sing and to pray, to be silent and to be still, to hold out the empty cups of our hands and to be filled with bread, with wine, with the abiding presence of the absent Lord until he comes again."<sup>3</sup>

I recently discovered that a new field of psychology has developed to help us discern and examine our desires. This field of expertise is called wantology. A wantologist helps clients identify and articulate what they want, as well as come up with ways that they can satisfy those desires. Now, though I don't want you to think of Sunday morning worship as a weekly group therapy session, with me as your wantologist, I do believe that one of the purposes of worship is both to satisfy and to deepen our desire for God in our lives, as individuals and as a congregation.

Worship calls upon you to face the kinds of questions whose answers can shape the direction, the shape, and the outcome of your life. Very basic questions like, What do you want? What do you desire in life? What do you wake up in the morning seeking? What do you go to bed at night hoping for? What do you really want? Do you want what God wants, for your life and for the world? Do you want, as Jesus taught us to want, that God's kingdom come and God's will be done on earth as in heaven? Do you long for the presence of God in your life?

"While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken into heaven. Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple praising God." Today we come here again to praise, to look to the ascended Lord, and to learn what is most worth longing for.

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<sup>1</sup> William Willimon, "God Has Gone Up." *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (April, May, June 2002) 28.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Day We Were Left Behind." Christianity Today website. May 18, 1998. Accessed May 14, 2015 <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1998/may18/8t6046.html?share=yGz%2b%2bDKr9JpGViiirVEvaKLbGtgAeOxl>>.

<sup>3</sup> Taylor, "The Day We Were Left Behind."