

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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A Blessed People

Luke 24:44-53

Eric Reed tells about how, following an Easter service, a woman approached a pastor he knows and asked, "So what happened with Jesus after the Resurrection?" "Well, he ascended into heaven and he's still alive," the pastor said. "I know he was resurrected, but he's alive?" she said. "Yes, he's alive," replied the pastor. "Alive? ALIVE?! Why didn't you tell me?!" Then, for the next two weeks, she telephoned everyone she knew and exclaimed, "Jesus is alive! Did you know he's alive?!"

I'm not sure how that woman had managed to separate Jesus' resurrection from his aliveness, but her reaction certainly reminds us that Jesus' ascension is a critical part of our belief that he is the living Lord. So it's good that we return to the end of Luke's Gospel and hear again that Jesus not only appears, but ascends as well. Following the resurrection, Jesus doesn't just make unexpected entrances, but also a dramatic exit. In fact, in a way we can think of the ascension as the culmination of the resurrection event, the ultimate destination of our risen Savior.

If so, the ascension definitely deserves more attention than we often give it. By neglecting it, we risk losing a sense of what makes our Christian faith distinctive, particularly within the larger culture. As Marva Dawn has written:

Ascension Day is the perfect church holiday because the world can't steal it. The culture around us has quite ruined Christmas and Easter. Of course, the world owned Christmas as its festival for the restoration of the sun before the early Christians used it to disguise their celebration of Christ's birth. . . . But the world has now stolen it for its consumeristic purposes and has seized Easter for the same idolatry. In my teen years I played clarinet in the high school band for the town Christmas parade at which Santa Claus was flown in by helicopter. Later, I heard, they flew the bunny in for Easter. But the world hasn't got the foggiest notion what to do with someone flying out.¹

Sometimes, maybe we in the church haven't been sure what to do with the ascension either. It's certainly a very unique part of the story. In this morning's Scripture passage, Luke narrates it very briefly: "While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven" (v. 51). We often use the term "ascension" to refer to what Luke is describing. "Ascend" is a spatial term. It has to do with moving up to the throne, the place of governing authority. So when Luke speaks of Jesus being "taken up" or "led up" into heaven, he's not referring to "heavens" in the sense of the sky, as if Jesus has, through an astounding act of levitation, just moved to another part of the universe. No, Luke means "heaven" in the sense that Jesus has departed into a different realm, such that now the disciples are in a different kind of relationship with him than they were when Jesus was here within time and space.

Like so many other writers in the New Testament, Luke wants his readers to know that Jesus has entered his glory, enthroned and exalted at God's right hand. In other words, the resurrection doesn't just mean that Jesus is no longer among the dead. It also means that

he has now entered into, and participates in, the immortal existence of God, God's own life and power. That is, Jesus is alive, in the fullest and deepest sense of the word. He now has a new and even more powerful form of existence. It's no wonder, as Luke says, that the disciples "worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God" (v. 53).

The word translated as "praising" can also mean "blessing." Jesus' disciples spent a lot of time at the temple, Israel's chief sanctuary, "blessing God." So Luke has brought us full circle. He opens his Gospel in the temple and closes it there as well. The best and most appropriate response to what God has done through Jesus Christ for the redemption of the world is praise and thanksgiving. That's why we're back here again today. Our life together as the church is marked by an atmosphere of worship and mutual blessing.

Sometimes, during the week leading up to our Sunday worship gathering, I'll come into this sanctuary, walk up the aisle and say, "Lord, I pray your blessing upon this place and all who will enter it, and most of all, that your name will be blessed." That's what this space is all about. It's about blessing God because of the blessing he has brought to us and to the world through Jesus Christ. In this respect, we're a blessed church, and our primary business on Sunday morning is blessing God. It's no surprise then, that our service concludes with a blessing. Often it takes the form of a prayer, seeking the guidance and empowerment of the Spirit as we go forth into God's world. Other times, it may be an even more explicit blessing that I as your pastor speak upon you, with my hands uplifted, as you depart to serve in the name of Christ.

Luke says, "When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them" (v. 50). These were the hands that had touched the sick, welcomed children, and washed feet. The hands that had gestured while teaching and preaching. The hands that had broken bread. The hands that had lifted the cup. The hands that were nailed to the cross. The hands that were given resurrection life. These are the hands now raised in blessing over his followers. We don't know exactly what he said, but we know what he did. Like Moses and Aaron and so many others who had been charged with shepherding God's people, the risen Jesus lifted his hands and blessed them.

There's a story told about an incident that occurred in England during the early days of the Salvation Army. A man with a charismatic personality and a magnetic speaking ability was traveling around the countryside declaring himself to be Jesus Christ returned to earth. He claimed to heal the sick, give sight to the blind, and perform other miracles. In the process, he managed to gather an impressive following of believers and curiosity-seekers.

One evening while he was lecturing in a great hall in London, the sound of music emerged in the distance, and gradually grew louder and closer. It was a Salvation Army band approaching the hall. Eventually, the little group of musicians entered the hall, tubas and trumpets blaring, and marched right down the center aisle to the speaker's rostrum. The Salvation Army captain motioned to the musicians, and the music ceased. Then he turned to the speaker and asked, "Are you really the Christ? Tell us plainly." "Yes," replied the speaker. "I am the Christ returned to earth." Looking at him steadily, the captain said, "Very well, then, show us your hands." At that point the band began to play again: "I shall know him, I shall know him, by the print of the nails in his hands!"²

When Jesus gave his disciples that Bethany blessing, he did so with wounded hands. Hands that bore the marks of what he had been through, what he had suffered, for their salvation, and for ours. In fact, in the verses right before the beginning of today's text, Jesus shows the disciples his hands and feet, challenging them to touch and see. He's no phantom, no

hallucination. The disciples aren't imagining Jesus back into existence. The reports of his resurrection are no fabricated story. The crucified one is now the risen one, fully embodied, fully alive. He has gone to the limit to secure the forgiveness of sins and to overcome death. So when Jesus blesses his disciples, he does so with scarred hands, healed hands.

The fact that the suffering Jesus and the risen, ascending Jesus are one and the same is crucial. It has huge implications for how we understand our own lives as disciples of our Lord. In particular, it helps determine the nature of our mission, as individuals and as the church. Remember that though our Scripture passage brings Luke's Gospel to a close, it's not really the end. It's actually the beginning of the next phase of the story, as Jesus' followers, then and now, are commissioned for witness in the world. I like the way that one commentator puts it when he says, "Jesus had ministered to them to prepare them for this time. Now it is nearly time to go. Training camp is just about over; a long season of ministry lies ahead."³

We're still in that long season of ministry and mission, working for the kingdom and bearing witness to his saving love as we await his coming. His departure didn't mean that he had done as much as he could do, within the time given to him, and now was handing the rest of the project over to us, to finish what he had started. No, the ascension reminds us that Jesus has already finished the work of salvation. The work of reuniting God and humanity. The work of securing your forgiveness, and your deliverance from the power of sin and death. The work of God being with us and our being with God. The work of God establishing his reign and bringing about a new creation. Now it's a matter of what you do, and what I do, with what Jesus has done.

The doing is still mainly his. Yes, you're called to daily trust in him, and to enact that trust in thought word, and deed, through righteous living. But the fact that he sends you forth each day with his blessing is a humbling reminder that his living presence is what makes the difference. When Jesus lifts his hands and gives you your daily benediction, he's not saying, "Good luck out there." He's not invoking some kind of mysterious cosmic power that will accompany you. His word to you isn't, "May the Force be with you." His word is, "Receive what the Father has promised and given, the Holy Spirit." The Spirit is the personal presence of the living Lord himself, in our congregation, as well as working, guiding, enabling you to be his daily disciple.

That's the point of the Lord's blessing. It binds us to him and keeps us dependent on him for the strength we need in order to be his followers. One person has summarized blessing as "God giving power to something or somebody to do that which they are designed or intended to do."⁴ Remember that just before Jesus blesses his disciples, he tells them to stay in Jerusalem "until you have been clothed with power from on high" (v. 49). His hands lifted up were an assurance that power would come down. The power of his presence. Always with us.

Though the ascension meant leaving, it also meant arriving. It meant both absence and presence. Presence in an even fuller and greater way than when our Lord was one person, inhabiting a particular time and space here on this earth. Paul tells the Ephesians, "He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe" (4:10). Now his spiritual presence would know no bounds. Or as preacher Barbara Brown Taylor has captured it, "It was almost as if he had not ascended but exploded, so that all the holiness that was once concentrated in him alone flew everywhere, flew far and wide, so that the seeds of heaven were sown in all the fields of the earth."⁵

What a blessing. A blessing from the Lord. The blessing of the Lord himself. So let us bless the Lord.

¹ Marva J. Dawn, Eugene H. Peterson, and Peter Santucci, *The Unnecessary Pastor: Rediscovering the Call* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 140.

² George Everett Ross, in Leonard Sweet, *Strong in the Broken Places*, 39-40. From Thomas G. Long, *Hebrews. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1997) n.pag.

³ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*. The IVP New Testament Commentary Series, 3 (Downer's Grove: IVP Academic, 1994) 386.

⁴ Philip Litle, referenced in "What Is Blessing, Exactly?" One For Israel. <https://www.oneforisrael.org/bible-based-teaching-from-israel/what-is-blessing/> (May 18, 2023).

⁵ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Gospel Medicine* (Cambridge: Cowley, 1995) 78.