

Stay Here
Luke 24.44-53
Ascension Sunday, May 24, 2020
Rev. Tim Phillips



By my count, it has been 74 days since we last met together for worship in person. That's 23 days before Governor Inslee issued his stay home order.

And I don't agree with the churches that are defying those orders and re-opening. But I do understand it. Seventy-four days is a long time. And, frankly, I'm tired of it.

So, with that as our background, here is the lesson for today.

Luke 24.44-53

⁴⁴Then Jesus said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." ⁴⁵Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Anointed One is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹And see, I am sending upon you what my Abba promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with *power* from on high."

⁵⁰Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. ⁵¹While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. ⁵²And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; ⁵³and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

So, imagine that this is Jesus' "stay home" order. If there is a proof-text for Jesus telling people to stay home, here it is: "... see I am sending upon you what my Abba promised; so *stay here!*"

I was reading an article this week by Lutheran pastor, Peter Marty, who says, churches, in the name of Jesus, are more obsessed with their right to gather than they are with the Gospel of love and justice. I would add that some churches appear to be more concerned about "purity" than they are about a place for their gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender children, their unhoused neighbors, and the lives of their elders; more comfortable with political power than risking the discomfort of compassion; more enamored with the President's agenda than they are with the message of Jesus.

Because, after all, here is Jesus with a "stay home" order of his own.

And it comes at the end of Luke's story about the life Jesus. You remember the beginning: young Mary and old Zechariah singing their hearts out; a tyrannical government displacing thousands; a birth in a stable and angels singing in a field, "Glory to God in the highest and, on earth, peace."

But then there is torture and execution and stories of resurrection and, after all that, an ending.

What you have probably come to know in your own life is that there are beginnings and there are endings. And you also know that those endings often turn into beginnings. Sometimes that transition is almost seamless. Sometimes it is jarring and painful. Often, the beginning that comes out of an ending leaves us uncertain about what we can know of what comes next.

I was in an online conference that David Horton recommended a week ago and we began by identifying things we needed to let go.

I thought for a long time and realized that what I am being forced to let go of is “knowing.” I don’t know what comes next. I don’t know what church and ministry will look after this. I don’t know what beginning there will be when COVID-19 ends – or at least this phase of it.

Endings bring beginnings but we rarely know what those beginnings look like.

I have to confess that, in this last week, I have been wondering if we are witnessing the end of American democracy. It is at least an end to the fantasy of American democracy. What our ancestors imagined as a “city set on a hill” – which it never was if you were native to this land or a slave – that vision of a bright beacon of freedom, however blurry, is beginning to dim.

If what we have imagined of American democracy is ending, what is beginning?

I don’t know.

And it seems like that is some of what those early followers of Jesus were dealing with. “Okay,” they might have said, “we’ve gone through all this death and destruction with you but it still doesn’t make any sense to us.”

So, as it says earlier in Luke 24 on the road to Emmaus, Jesus, “*beginning* with Moses and all the prophets,” explained to them, once again, this vision for new life. And here at the very end of Luke 24, Jesus is still “opening their minds” to that vision. And, the story says, “repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed ... to all nations, *beginning* from Jerusalem.”

It’s an end. But, Jesus says, it’s not too late for a beginning.

And, in fact, Jesus says, “I’m making good on God’s promise to send something that will ‘clothe you with *power* from on high.’”

This is forecasting the story that comes at the beginning of volume II which is the book of Acts. Acts is the sequel of Luke’s story about Jesus. And it begins with a new expression of the Spirit - one imagined by the Hebrew prophet Joel and used by Peter to explain this new episode of the Spirit at work. That’s Pentecost next week.

And just to be clear, no one really knew what that was supposed to look like. That’s why this promise of the Spirit is so important.

Remember Jesus having that conversation with a religious leader in the gospel of John? The leader comes to Jesus by night to ask about “eternal life” and Jesus says some confusing things about being born and being born again that don’t seem to make any sense to this poor guy. Jesus tries to explain by saying that “eternal life” has to do with being born of the *Spirit* and the Spirit is like the wind, “you don’t *know* where it comes from or where it is going.”

Endings call into question our assumptions and our expectations. Endings are the opening for a beginning where the Spirit moves us in ways and directions we did not know to go.

It's like that thing I say about "God" that comes from Ephesians 3: "There is a Power that is already at work within us that is able to accomplish far more than we can ask or imagine."

The beginning that is hinted at in this ending of Luke is the promise of a Spirit at work in ways we could have never imagined.

Now, if there is some part of this story that makes our historical critical, scientific minds a little nervous, it probably is what happens next in vs. 51: "While he was blessing them, he was carried up into heaven."

I have always resisted this as an early Christian construction to make sure folks know that "our guy won." He may have been brutally executed by the current political system but he is *ruling now* in heaven.

Resisted or not, if we were sitting in the Sanctuary this morning and you looked up to the right, you would see a combination resurrection/ascension scene depicted in our beautiful stain glass: Jesus rising just off the ground, revealing his wounded feet, and his arms outstretched in blessing.

I thought it would be easy to skip this part since you aren't sitting in that Sanctuary. But it is there and we will be too, someday.

So, the first thing to say is that I don't think "ascension" originally comes from Christianity. After all - and I'm always surprised and sorry I have to say this - Jesus and most of his followers were devout Jews.

And they would know the story of Moses, going up the mountain at the end of his life and never coming back. His grave cannot be found, the story says, and "Never since has there *arisen* a prophet like Moses, whom God knew face to face." That's the mysterious end of Moses' life ... and the beginning of a new chapter in Israel's life.

And if we were sitting in the Sanctuary, there is another window in the center balcony that I sometimes call the jet-engine-on-fire window. Actually, it depicts the story of the prophet Elijah being taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire. That brings Elijah's story to an end. But the ministry of the prophet Elisha begins. If you read this story in II Kings chapter 2, it is strikingly similar to Luke's story here in Luke 24.

And just in case we missed it, when Luke tells the story of the transfiguration of Jesus in chapter 9, guess who's there? Moses and Elijah.

Of course! Because if you want to tell a story about someone who has lasting power, in the end, they get carried up to heaven where their ministry is not limited by time or place.

This is not foreign to us. On Good Friday, Anita read part of a sermon Dr. King preached on the death of Mahatma Gandhi. King says:

"The man who shot Gandhi only shot him into the hearts of humanity ... [now] he belongs to the ages." In other words, Gandhi ascended from his place in India to be part of the human spirit. He is part of that universal vision of repentance and forgiveness. And the same could be said about Dr. King.

"Ascension" - being carried into heaven - doesn't mean a physical place. It means that these folks had a power beyond our present limitations of time and place. By virtue of that kind of spiritual power, they rise above the boundaries of our own religious, political, and cultural reality. They belong to heaven. And I would remind you that it is our job to pray: "Our Father, Our Abba, ... your reign come, your will be done, *on earth*, as it is in heaven.

Endings are beginnings – beginnings that are an opening for the Spirit to lead us in the reign of justice and love by ways we do not yet know.

It's hard to stay here. This stay home order is getting really old. But maybe we have been thinking about it the wrong way – as something to be endured rather than a way to be engaged with the spirit who makes beginnings out of endings.

After 74 days of not being together, I'm not sure how comforting it is that endings are beginnings and that the Spirit is leading us in a way we do not know.

Whatever hope this story offers me is in that image of Jesus "lifting up his hands and blessing them." Blessing has the last word.

Even though those early followers hear the message over and over again and don't get it, blessing has the last word.

Even though some of them have struggled and been unfaithful in those difficult days, blessing has the last word.

Even though they have no clue what comes next, blessing has the last word.

After 74 days of not being together, do you know why we keep singing "Bring Us Home" at the end of each online service?

Because it is a blessing.

It's a blessing that came out of an ending.

It's a blessing that signals a new beginning every time we sing it.

It's a blessing that reminds us that Love is still calling us home – regardless of distance or struggle or failure or the fear of not knowing.

We sing it because, in spite of everything, regardless of what we know or don't know, blessing gets the last word.

And today, if you hear that word, stay home and do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

Rev. Peter Marty, "Churches obsessed with their right to reopen are missing the point," *Christian Century*, June 3, 2020. *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* ed. Clayborne Carson (Grand Central Publishing, 1998), p.132. "Bring Us Home" is one of eleven Heritage Hymns this congregation sings regularly as an expression of its values and vision. It was a gift to the church in the aftermath of a young man's AIDS-related death and the rejection of his parents.