

July 2, 2023

THE RESURRECTED CHRIST AND THE CHURCH'S MISSION

Luke 24:36-53

(16 of 16 in a series through Luke)

A couple of weeks ago at small group someone brought up one of the Ivy League schools in our nation, perhaps Harvard or Yale. I can't remember which one. And we remarked on how they'd begun with a commitment and goal to educate for the glory of Christ and good of the church, but how they're (obviously) so far from that goal now. And it got me to thinking about what is required to keep an institution on track. What could Harvard or Yale or many other (similar) institutions have done not to drift so far from their mission? Perhaps there were a thousand things they needed to be doing differently; I don't know. But it also got me to thinking about churches and the same threat about losing our way.

We all know of once-thriving churches that now hardly resemble anything relating to their former glory. I've spoken to a few people recently about another church they'd been a part of at one point and how glorious things had been there, only to note today that none of them are there, that the church has greatly struggled, and somehow has lost that former glory. It seems, if nothing else, that we need periodically to stop and remind ourselves of where things started and where we're going as a Christian institution, and we especially need to do that as a church. And I think Luke 24:36-53 gives us a chance to do just that this morning.

Luke 24:36-53 is considered the epilogue to Luke's gospel. We've already seen Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. We know he's appeared in his resurrection body to a couple of men on their way to Emmaus as well as Peter. But in these last verses Luke takes a number of other details and puts them all together, putting a bow of sorts on the gift of this gospel that he's written for us. We have in our text another resurrection appearance, this time with Jesus appearing to the eleven and others as they're gathered together in Jerusalem. We're once more reminded that everything is a fulfillment of what the Lord had already foretold in the Scripture. We're reminded of the church's mission. We're reminded of the coming Spirit's presence and power. And, finally, we're reminded of Jesus' ascension and the worship of those around him.

In some ways, each of these elements is brief. We might think of other gospel accounts where each of these elements receives more detailed attention. In John's gospel you have more (and more detailed) resurrection appearances. In Matthew's gospel, you have a more extension commission given to the church. And even in Luke's second volume (Acts) you have more details given about the ascension as the time frame between the resurrection and that event is spelled out. Here, at the end of Luke's gospel, you have a number of snapshots, it seems. It reads like one of those movies where the movie has gone on for a good while, and then at the end, every loose end is tied up real quickly with some kind of montage that takes you from character to character and issue to issue, showing you how it's all worked out.

But in this wrapping-up-everything epilogue Luke reminds us of a number of important truths. He reminds us of what launched the church into its mission in those early days. He reminds us of why the Scripture was such an important reality for Christians. And he reminds us of what exactly Christ commanded his church to be doing as well as the means by which we'll pull it off and the end to which we're working. And as we walk through each of these things, it's an opportunity for us to look back to the beginning and remember why we exist as a church and to look to the end and remember why we're doing what we're doing. So, let me start with a reminder of the reality that launched the church into its mission in the first place—Jesus bodily and physically was raised from the grave.

Christ was raised bodily

This seems to be the clear point of verses 36-42. You'll remember from last week that Cleopas and the other unnamed friend had hurried back to Jerusalem after they'd realized that it was Jesus that had been speaking to them. Well, Luke tells us that as they're telling the others all that had happened, Jesus suddenly appears in the room with them, saying, "Peace to you!" (v. 36). And they're frightened, thinking he's a spirit. But of course Jesus knows their fears and doubts and even their belief that he might be a spirit, so he invites them to look at his hands and feet and to touch him to confirm that he has flesh and bones. And just in case they're still thinking that their minds are playing tricks on them and he's not physically and bodily there, he asks them for something to eat and eats in front of them a piece of broiled fish. That was clearly not because he'd been doing so much that day that he'd worked up a good appetite. He was doing it for their sake, leaving them no doubt that he was physically there.

Obviously everything here is to show that Jesus really was raised physically and bodily. It wasn't just his spirit that was raised, and he didn't just appear as some hologram. He could indeed appear and disappear—as we've seen—but he was flesh and bone, even eating. And at the end of our text we're told that he parted from them bodily as well, ascending into heaven (v. 51). So Jesus was not only raised bodily but still has his resurrected body now.

Now, there's much I could say here, but I want to make sure that we get to everything in this text, so let me just note two things. First, when God the Son assumed a human nature, that was a permanent reality. Sure, the body he took on in Mary's womb was one that was perishable and weak, one that could suffer and die. And the body that was raised from the dead was glorious and imperishable, like the resurrection body we'll get some day as well. But it was still his physical body. He is permanently the God-man. He assumed a human nature, never to let it go. Second, we need this to be true for our salvation because only a man could represent us before God as our high priest, and Jesus is right now (and forever) interceding for us as our high priest so that he might be our source of salvation, not for a short time but forever. Jesus was raised physically and bodily from the grave. That's the reality that is that launches the church's mission. But we're also reminded of why the Scripture was such a treasured reality for them that they pointed to again and again in their preaching—all of Jesus' work is a fulfillment of the Old Testament.

All of Jesus' work is a fulfillment of the Old Testament

We saw this last week, but it's clear again in our text. In verses 44-47 Jesus tells his disciples that the things that happened with him *had* to happen because what was written about him in the Old Testament had to be fulfilled. Specifically he says, "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 and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled" (v. 44). Then, after opening their minds to understand the Scripture he adds, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (vv. 46-47). In other words, Jesus tells his followers that what they will proclaim had already been foretold in the Old Testament.

This became a controlling reality in the preaching of the early church. If you go on to read the book of Acts, you'll notice again and again that they're rooting their claims in the Scripture. They're quoting Moses, David, and Isaiah, showing how it is fulfilled in the work of Jesus.

Now, I know this was our focus last week, so I won't camp out here very long, but I do want to explore one issue briefly. Jesus specifically said that his suffering, resurrection on the third day, and the message of repentance and forgiveness of sins to the nations were foretold in the OT. And I can easily point to texts like Isaiah 53 to see Jesus' suffering foretold. I could point to texts like Jeremiah 31 and the promise of forgiveness of sins in the new covenant and Isaiah 49 about God's redeeming work reaching the nations. But where it is stated that the Messiah would rise from the dead on the third day?

Well, I think I could make a really long argument here, and I've actually written one,¹ but I just want to show us a pattern briefly this morning. It has been noted that when you look for references to the "third day" in the OT, it's used disproportionately.² Here's what I mean. When you look for how often the numbers two, three, and four occur (in Hebrew) in the OT, the answer is 772, 605, and 456 times, respectively. That should be expected because smaller numbers are going to be used more. You don't always have three things, but any time you do, you always first have two of them. So, again, the descending nature of the occurrences of these numbers makes sense. But when you come to the phrases "two days" (or the "second day"), "three days" (or the "third day"), and "four days" (or the "fourth day"), the frequency shifts considerably. While the second day and fourth day are mentioned fourteen and eight times, respectively, the third day is mentioned sixty-nine times in the Old Testament.³ The frequency of this occurrence alone is sufficient to draw the attention of the reader, isn't it? There's something on about the frequency of the mentioning of the "third day" in the OT. The careful OT reader should begin to think, "Why does this reference to the third day happen so often?" kind of like if you read the OT and think, "Why are there so many barren women mentioned?"

¹ See <https://equip.sbts.edu/publications/journals/journal-of-theology/thus-it-is-written-redemptive-history-and-christs-resurrection-on-the-third-day/>.

² Michael Russell, "On the Third Day, According to the Scriptures," *RTR* (2008): 1-17.

³ By "the second day," "the third day," etc., I also mean to include "two days," "three days," etc. It should be noted that these findings by Russell exclude dates, such as "on the second day of the month."

Well, is there any pattern that develops with these occurrences of “the third day” when it is used? Indeed there is. In an interesting article, Michael Russell has pointed out that what you consistently find happening in a story when the phrase “on the third day” appears is a climactic reversal, usually involving a death, or the escape from likely death.”⁴

For example, in the Isaac narrative when it looks like Abraham is going to sacrifice his son and Isaac will die, we read, “On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar” (Gen 22:4), and sure enough, there is a reversal and instead of dying, Isaac is spared. Or, take the Joseph narrative. After selling their brother into slavery, Joseph’s brothers are now before him, he has power over them, and he’s accusing them of being spies. The brothers fear that they will be executed, and yet we read, “On the third day Joseph said to [his brothers], ‘Do this and you will live, for I fear God’” (Gen 42:18). Again, the reader anticipates the possibility of death only to see a reversal to life on the third day. Then, in 1 Samuel 20 Saul wants to kill David. He even throws his spear at Jonathan, his own son, to try to kill him at one point, and Jonathan knows he’s serious about his intent to kill David. How can David survive when the most powerful man in the kingdom wants him dead? Well, David and Jonathan make a plan, and “on the third day” (1 Sam 20:19) David ends up meeting up with Jonathan and fleeing. Again, likely death is reversed so that on the third day we see life instead. In each case, what looks like likely death sees a climactic reversal, and—not coincidentally in my opinion—it happens on the third day. Now, I could point out many other such cases, but for the sake of time, we’ll let that suffice.

Okay, so what’s going on here? What you have here, I think, is the same kind of pattern as with those barren women that litter the pages of the OT. The Lord wants to show that salvation his work alone, so he keeps raising up people to lead and save his people from the wombs of barren women. But ultimately this pattern reaches its climax as our savior is born of one who is not simply barren but a virgin. It seems the same reality is present here. Just as the OT is filled with examples of likely death being reversed to life on the third day, so it reaches its climax when our savior is delivered not from likely death but from actual death, and this on the third day. And so what we proclaim about Christ’s work—his life, death, and resurrection—has already been shown to us in the Old Testament itself (sometimes in direct, prophetic ways, and sometimes through types, shadows, and repeated patterns). Christ’s work to save us was always God’s plan, and we get to rejoice in that in all of the Scripture. And this is why the early believers were so intent not just on preaching the gospel but in showing that it’s a fulfillment of the OT Scriptures. What then is our mission? Well, Christ gave his church the mission to be his witnesses in the world.

Christ gave his church a mission to be his witnesses in the world

As the resurrected Christ appears in the room with them, he not only shows them that he’s physically with them, but after he tells them that the Scripture foretold that “repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (v.

⁴ Ibid., 10-11.

47), he adds, “You are witnesses of these things” (v. 48). They are the ones who will fulfill this proclamation of the good news to the world and will be his witnesses.

This has been the mission of the church from the beginning. We are Christ’s witnesses in the world. We bear witness of what he has done—living, dying, and rising. We bear witness that he is king and ruler and judge, teaching each other to obey all that he’s commanded. This is our task. And what’s important for us is not only to be obedient to it but also to recognize that the enemy’s design will always be to distract us from this mission.

Now, of course, he can do that in direct ways through persecution. He can do that by compromising our own obedience through immorality. And he can lead us away from our mission by leading us to hold to falsehoods that are against Scripture. But all of those are more direct kind of attacks that we (hopefully) are aware of and armed for. But another way he can subtly lead us astray from our mission is by having us pursue other “good” things instead of that. The church could make its mission humanitarian efforts like caring for the homeless or providing medical assistance to the sick or fighting to end racial strife or any number of good things. But if we focus on these things in the place of this mission that Christ has given us, then we will have been as deceived by the devil as the one who walks away from Scripture. Tom always frames it by asking, “What wouldn’t be done if the church weren’t around?” Unbelievers may well still create homeless shelters, hospitals, and work to end racial enmity. But no one would bear witness to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, telling others to believe, be baptized, and obey all that he commands. That’s our mission.

As individual Christians, we’re involved in a number of good things and can most of our week doing them. But as a church, this is our mission. We must be about it to the ends of the earth and the end of the age. And, concerning this mission, Jesus also reminds us that as we carry this out, we are armed with Scripture, grace, and the Spirit’s power under Christ’s reign.

We do this armed with the Scripture, grace, and the Spirit’s power under Christ’s reign

Right after telling them that they are to be his witnesses, Jesus adds, “And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high” (v. 49). Now, we’ve already seen that we’re armed with Scripture as we’re Christ’s witnesses in this world. We merely bear witness to what the Scripture says. But we’re also armed with the Spirit’s power.

Jesus told his followers here to wait to begin their mission until they were clothed with power from on high, and we know that this happened on the day of Pentecost as the Lord poured out his Spirit on his people, and they boldly proclaimed the gospel. But this wasn’t a rare occurrence that simply inaugurated the new age after Christ’s resurrection. Rather, everyone who comes to faith in Christ is given the Holy Spirit. Paul can even say in Romans 8:9 that if you don’t have the Spirit, you don’t belong to Christ. So all of us are empowered by the same Spirit who empowered the early church. Don’t lose sight of that as you’re challenged by the example of

their bold witness in the book of Acts. Nor, forget that we're objects of God's grace along the way.

Luke writes in verse 50, "And he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them." Jesus blessed his people. This is what we do each Sunday in the benediction and is the reason we lift our hands as we do it. And in Jesus' case, it may well have been the blessing of Numbers 6:24-26. I'm not sure. But what's important for us to understand is that this blessing was a pronouncement of God's grace on them. Jesus was saying, "May the grace of God be upon you." They were objects of his grace.

And so are we. The Lord has lavished his grace on us by saving us. He is our advocate so that when we sin we're not condemned and hopeless but are forgiven. He is our gracious God, and we are constantly objects of his grace in this life. So, we can say that we carry out this mission armed with Scripture, empowered by the Spirit, as objects of his grace, and we can add under the reign of Christ.

Luke tells us, "While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven" (v. 51). This is a reference to Jesus' ascension, where he went back up into heaven to reign at the Father's right hand. In other words, as we carry out the mission that Jesus has given to us in this world, we do it knowing that he is reigning over all things. He may deem that we suffer or even die, but don't be deceived, all things are under his might and power, and nothing occurs apart from him. And so, we seek to obey the mission Christ has given us while armed with the Scripture, empowered by the Spirit, as objects of grace, and under Christ's reign. And, finally, this text reminds us that all of this is to the end that Christ is worshiped.

All of this is to the end that Christ is worshiped

The last two verses of Luke's gospel are full of worship. Luke writes, "And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God" (vv. 52-53). Obviously we see worship in verse 52 as they worship the risen and ascended Christ. But we also see it in verse 53 because the note of "blessing God" is simply a way of saying that they worshiped him.

This is the goal of what we do. John Piper has famously said, "Missions exists because worship doesn't," meaning that we make disciples so that they will move from being rebels against Christ to worshipers of Christ. And it's what we show ourselves to be as we gather Sunday after Sunday and worship the risen and reigning Lord.

And so, as we wrap up our study of Luke's gospel, we've been brought back to the foundations of what we do. We believe that Jesus physically and bodily rose from the dead and that this was foretold in the Scripture. Therefore, we are making disciples of Jesus from people of all nations so that they might join us in worshiping the only one worthy of our worship. May we make sure, then, that we are faithful witnesses of who he is and what he has done. And let's remember what he has done as we now come to the table. Amen.