

MAY 29, 2022 ASCENSION

An option for the Gospel comes from Luke 24:46-53

So today we find ourselves in the very last chapter of the Gospel of Luke, but you will not find the words "the end" in our Gospel today because well, the Gospel never really does end, does it?

The Gospel is alive much like stepping into a flowing stream, it is always moving, and how it moves or if it moves at all, largely depends on you. So, as I said, today we're in the Gospel of Luke.

And as we often find, we are picking up in the middle of a much larger story.

And I know I seem to say this just about every week, but to truly understand this story, you have to first come to understand the larger story.

And of course, Luke begins this larger story in chapter one, addressing a mysterious man named Theophilus.

And he tells this man, Theophilus, that he has investigated the Jesus event.

And now he's gonna let it all out in an orderly sequence so that Theophilus can be assured of the certainty of the teachings.

That is his objective.

And since Theophilus means "friend of God" or "lover of God", and as Christians, this is what we aspire to be, this Gospel was in a very real sense written for us.

So today we find ourselves in the last chapter of the Gospel of Luke and Jesus has come up missing.

The tomb is empty causing great confusion.

Luke describes two angels in dazzling garments, appearing to the women, proclaiming that He has risen, but when they return to the other disciples, who by the way are hiding, to tell them, they don't believe him.

Next comes the famous foot race.

And when Peter finds His tomb empty, what does he do?

Does he run through the streets of Jerusalem announcing He has risen, hallelujah, hallelujah?

No, he goes home.

The end.

It is over.

We had hoped.

Next up comes one of my favorite stories in all of the Bible, the road to **Emmaus**.

Two disciples of Jesus are heading home.

Again, it's the end, Jesus is dead, it's over, might as well just go on home.

And as they're making their way home talking about all the things that had occurred, and of course much had, suddenly Jesus appears to them and walks with them.

But strangely they don't recognize Him, which you know, I've always found that a bit curious because these guys are disciples.

I mean, they certainly would've known what Jesus looked like.

They'd been following Him around for some time, but there was something about the resurrected body of Jesus that was different.

So anyway, Jesus walks up on these guys and He asks a question, "What are you discussing as you walk along?"

And they say, and I love this, they say, "Are you the only one in all of Israel who has not heard of all the things that have occurred?"

Almost mocking Him, making fun of Him.

And then I love this even more, 'cause Jesus says, "What things?"

Two words, "What things?"

But those two words, prime the pump and out comes a waterfall of information.

And I think there's a real lesson for us right here, because, you know, people are dying to tell their story.

If only we would have the patience to simply listen.

So, as I said, Jesus asked, "What things?"

And they say, "Well, the things of Jesus of Nazareth, a prophet mighty in word and deed."

And how the chief priest and the scribes had sentenced Him to death and crucified Him and then here it comes, "We were hoping that He would be the one to redeem Israel."

Jesus responds, "Oh, how foolish you are, how slow of heart to believe all the prophets had spoken."

And then beginning with Moses and going through all the prophets, He interpreted to them what referred to Him, talking about Jesus now, and the Scriptures, which I have to say, that had to be the greatest Bible study in the history of the world. Imagine the Word explaining, well, itself! But do they recognize Him?

No.

Why?

'Cause they're stuck in that place.

You know, that place "we had hoped," that place, you know, the end.

And what comes next very much relates to our Gospel today because Jesus makes it very clear that He is more than willing to move on down the road without them.

Why?

Because Jesus requires an invitation.

He's not gonna just invade your heart.

He's not rude.

He loves you so much that He has given you the freedom to not love Him back if you choose.

But the disciples in our story today, they urged Him, urged Him to come and join them, made that invitation.

So, as He sat down at table with them, broke the bread, all of a sudden, their eyes were opened and they recognized Him.

"We had hoped that He would be the one to redeem Israel."

The end.

That's where they were, but Jesus is saying, no, no, no, this is not the end.

Keep hoping.

We had hoped turned into keep on hoping.

We had hoped.

We run into that quite a bit in our lives, don't we?

We had hoped.

We had hoped that the doctors would be able to save our loved one.

We had prayed fervently, but our prayers were not answered.

We had hoped.

And then at the funeral, somebody says, "well, you know, they're in a better place, but you know, we had hoped."

And as we grieve and we find ourselves at the end, somehow the preacher's words about resurrection just doesn't automatically overcome the deep disappointment, does it?

And so, what do we conclude?

Well, the preacher doesn't get it.

In fact, we might even feel a quiet resentment that our grief is being used as a launching platform for his or her theological insight.

Let me just say in passing on a personal note that I do not feel that any priest or preacher can even begin to speak of such things as resurrection to new life until we first are willing to acknowledge the depth of the pain that is causing that conversation. But my friends, we live in a world full of pain, full of suffering.

We had hoped, the end. So, here's my question. How can we move from we had hoped to we're hoping?

Kinda gets back to that fundamental question. How do we really believe?

I mean, we know the story, we had hoped, but how can we just know?

Well, getting back to our friends on the road to Emmaus, after having this amazing encounter with Jesus, they returned to the upper room to tell the others.

And as they're describing this strange man that had appeared on the road and how He had suddenly turned into Jesus while He was breaking the bread, while they're telling that story, in the middle of it, Jesus suddenly appears in their midst and says, "Peace be with you."

Can you imagine?

I mean, let me tell you, there was not a whole lot of peace in that room.

They were terrified.

They thought they were seeing a ghost and what does Jesus say?

"I'm not a ghost."

And then He proceeds to prove it.

Look at My hands, look at My feet.

Ghosts do not have flesh and bones.

And He takes it even further.

He says, "Do you have anything to eat?"

So, they gave Him a piece of fish and He ate it right in front of them, thus proving He was not a ghost.

Understand, He's not saying there's no such thing as ghosts.

He's simply saying I'm not a ghost, because He's standing there in the flesh, which is significant.

Why?

Because you know, a lotta religions will teach when somebody dies, the person and their spirit leave their body.

And they're judged to go to some form of heaven or hell.

But as Christians, we believe in a bodily resurrection, we believe that we're completely restored.

And as Jesus appears in the upper room to stand in front of His disciples in the flesh, He is proving our belief in a bodily resurrection. "

Jesus said to His disciples, 'Thus, it is written that the Christ would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day.

And that repentance for the forgiveness of sins would be preached in His name to all the nations.

Beginning from Jerusalem you are the witnesses to these things and behold, I am sending you the promise of the Father upon you."

Clearly a reference to Pentecost, which by the way is next week.

"But stay in the city," meaning don't go anywhere.

Don't do anything, just stay and wait, which sometimes the waiting is the hardest part.

"Until your clothed with power from on high."

So, there's a lot here to unpack.

Let's start with "Thus, it was written that the Christ would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day."

You know, they kinda missed that one.

Of course, as Christians, we can put on our Christianity eyeglasses and see with hindsight vague references, particularly in the prophet Daniel or the prophet Isaiah, when he talked about the suffering servant.

But let me tell you, they completely missed all that. But when it came to "you are the witnesses of these things," well, that certainly was true.

They got that.

The disciples had seen a whole lotta things.

They had been following Jesus around for around three years and they seemed to have been perpetually confused from the beginning through the middle and certainly now in the end, which of course, as we said is really not the end, but just the beginning, because as we have noted, the Good News never really ends.

But now Jesus has given them a mission. And with this mission, He is giving them a message. And the message, in case you forgot, is “you are the witnesses of these things.”

He's not saying you will be a witness, and He's not saying, please be a witness He's not saying consider being a witness if you got the time. No, He's saying “you are witnesses to these things” because, you know, when it comes to being a witness, it's not really a voluntary thing, is it? If you witness something you can't really un-witness it.

So being a witness is really a state of being, it's who we are, it's what we know, it's what we have seen.

What we witness makes us who we are.

But you cannot witness to that which you do not know.

You cannot witness to that which you have not received.

“You are the witnesses of these things.”

Well, what things?

Well, as I said, bodily, resurrection for starters, but also, they're witnesses to the message.

The message, remember?

Repentance for the forgiveness of sin.

Now I know that word seems to get lost in the shuffle.

A lot of us don't really wanna hear that word, repentance, but the fact is, repentance for the forgiveness of sins is God's plan for our redemption.

And if you've heard that, if you believe that, well then guess what?

You are the witnesses to these things. So, here's my question.

If we, as church are witnesses to these things, then why are we so quiet?

Why are we so silent?

Are we waiting for another miracle? I mean, think about, let's be honest.

I mean, as we sit around the dinner tables with our family and friends, when it comes to the subject of

Jesus, we're silent as the grave, this is our testimony.

Now what does that silence say about our testimony?

What does that silence say about how we imagine God in our lives?

You know what it says?

It says we had hoped.

It says, the end, that's what it says. And I get it.

I understand it's very easy for us to think, well, you know, it really wouldn't make much of a difference, you know, don't bring up religion and politics.

It's just gonna upset people.

But hear me when I say that if we are “witnesses to these things” and we remain silent, we are denying who we claim to be, which by the way are disciples of Christ.

And then we are denying who Jesus needs us to be, because understand, if people do not hear our experience, if they do not hear our hope, then they do not hear we are hoping, what they hear is we had hoped.

So how do we do this?

How do we testify to the reality that a world doesn't really seem to be all that interested in hearing about?

Well, our Gospel tells us today, “You are witnesses to these things, and behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you, but stay in the city until you are clothed from power on high.”

Power on high, my friends, oh yeah.

Like I said, that's Pentecost, is next week, tune in, it's gonna be great, we have a Baptism.

We will see this power fall on these inadequate disciples, which by the way is us.

Remember how they were hiding in the upper room?

After all they had seen, after all they had heard, after all they had witnessed, that was their testimony.

We had hoped, the end.

But boy, when that power from on high came, what happened?

Cowering Peter hiding in the upper room transformed into bold preaching Peter.

And he stepped out on that balcony and he was so on fire, wooh!

He gave the greatest homily/sermon in the history of the world, converted 3,000 people.

I would love to have a copy of that homily.

And what drove that bus?

Power from on high, that's what drove it.

And that is how we moved from we had hoped to we are hoping.

'Cause hear me when I say, you could talk about Jesus all day long and many do, but you cannot preach Jesus until He is with you and in you, that is the promise of John 14.

You ought to read it.

Or as Jesus told Nicodemus, “You must be born from above.”

And how do we do that?

Well, Peter tells us very clearly in the book of Acts.

“Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

“Repent and be baptized.”

Again, there's that word, repent.

Metanoia, change your ways, my friend, if you're not changing at all, then you're not responding to the Gospel.

The greatest response we can give the Gospel is **change**.

“Repent and be baptized.”

Let's talk about that.

Baptized.

What does that mean?

The fundamental reason for baptism is salvation.

We believe that if we are baptized into Christ, we are baptized into His death.

What does that mean?

It means that as Christ rose from the dead, we who are baptized into His death will rise as well.

That's our belief, but there's another fundamental aspect of baptism that is often overlooked, rarely discussed.

And that is the baptism of the Holy Spirit or as Jesus describes in our Gospel today, “being clothed from power on high.”

And while baptism is what the church calls a one time only sacrament, meaning just one time, one and done, baptism of the Holy Spirit?

No, that's literally a daily, sometimes hourly walk.

That is a process, my friend, I guess what I'm trying to say is that our spiritual condition.

It requires maintenance.

Like a plant needs to be watered, or a body needs to be exercised.

The spirit needs to be fed.

And it is only once the spirit is fed that we can truly witness to this fallen world.

Or as Paul, who has a habit of putting things very well, does in 1 Corinthians chapter two, I think started with verse 13.

“This is what we speak. Not in words, taught us by human wisdom, but words taught by the Spirit explaining the spiritual realities. The person without the spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, but considers it all foolishness.

They cannot understand them because they are only discerned through the Spirit.

Now, the person with the Spirit makes judgements about all things, but such a person is not subject to merely human judgment for who has known the mind of the Lord? Who can instruct them, but we who have the mind of Christ,” and that's it.

That's what the Holy Spirit will give you.

It will give you the mind of Christ.

How do we witness in this world?

Well, number one, we receive the power from on high, which does what?

Two, gives us the mind of Christ.

And how do we do that?

Well, first of all, it's not, it is not easy.

And anybody who tells you differently is not speaking the truth.

It is not easy.

It starts with taking a very hard look at our spiritual condition and understanding that if we are actively practicing habitual sin in our lives, we have no power.

We certainly do not have the mind of Christ.

If we are nursing a resentment, if we are harboring hate, if we're allowing all that's going on in this crazy passing world to twist us up like a knot, we are blocking out the sunlight of the Holy Spirit and we have no power.

We certainly do not have the mind of Christ.

Like I said, it's not easy.

It's difficult.

We have to maintain our spiritual condition and that doesn't just happen.

You gotta work on it.

And how do you do it?

Through prayer and the reading of His Word.

Because my friends, we are “witnesses to these things”.

Yes, my friend, we are “witnesses to these things,”

But we're weak.

We're timid.

We need to pray for power and find opportunities to share.

They're all around us.

Our Gospel today ends with a mysterious scene. Jesus ascending into Heaven, but is that really the end?

Is it really, we had hoped?

Well, like I said, kinda up to us, isn't it? This is our challenge.

We are “witnesses to these things” and our testimony is not, we had hoped, but that we are hoping, because the story never ends.

This week I challenge you, get outside of your own head, push through your fear, go out into this world and find a sheep wandering in circles.

They're not hard to find.

Someone who is in pain, someone who is suffering, someone who has lost hope in this fallen world and maybe say, “hey, let me tell you about a man named Jesus and all that He has done for me.”

Enjoy the holiday, remember all who died for their country and the most recent victims of another mass shooting. Peace, God bless the USA. Pastor KatieD+