



Luke 24:36-53

“A New Beginning” (20th in a series on Luke’s Gospel)

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Pastor Phil Thrailkill
Main Street UMC
211 North Main St.
Greenwood, SC 29646

Church Office: 864-229-7551
Church Website with sermon manuscripts: www.msumc1.org
Email: PThrailkil@aol.com

“Following Christ from City Center”

LUKE 24:36-53 "THE NEW BEGINNING"

1) vv.36-42 APPEARANCE AND RESPONSE: NATURE OF THE RESURRECTION BODY.

Jesus Surpasses All Greco-Roman Post-Mortem Categories

a) vv.36-37 Appearance (Out Of His Realm) and Response.

// Mark 6:45-52

Invisible World Intrudes: He Appears, Talks, Walks, Eats, Is Touched, Teaches, Goes

36 While they were talking about this, 2 Prior Appearances: Emmaus + Peter

37 JESUS HIMSELF STOOD AMONG THEM, and said to them, "PEACE BE WITH YOU." 10:5-7

37 They were STARTLED AND TERRIFIED, Emotions: Panic, Fear Of Numinous, Preternatural

and thought that they were seeing a spirit (i.e. ghost/angel). Acts 23:8, Intellect: Present Categories

They Saw (6x) /Heard Jesus = Vision + Audition

b) vv.38-42 Q & A From The Risen Lord On The Nature Of His Resurrection Body.

Most Concrete Appearance Of All

1. vv.38-40 Continuity Of Personal Identity: The Evidence Of Wounds To The Hands and Feet.

Immortal, Not Limited By Space/Time, Prototype Of Christian Existence, 1 Jn. 3:2

38 He said to them, No Reanimated Corpse, Disembodied Soul, Apparition Of Dead Hero

Q1 "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?" Testing Question, Rebuke, Question No. 1

A1 Not A Specter, Mirage, Ephemeral, Shadowy, Not A Phantom Or Spirit

39 a Look at my hands and my feet; History/Signs Of His Suffering Not Erased! Answer No. 1

b see that it is I myself. Continuity Of Identity: Wounds But New Powers

b' Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." Whole Reclaimed

40 a' And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. I John 1:1-2, John 20:24-29

Transformation Of Corporeal Frame, Non-Angelic

2. vv.41-42 Continuity Of Physicality: Spirits Don't Eat Fish!

Tobit 2:19, Angels Don't Eat

One Of A Kind, Flesh & Blood, Not Immaterial

41 While in their JOY they were disbelieving and still wondering, Paradigm Change, Mental Furniture Rearranged!

Q2 he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" Question No. 2

A2 They gave him a piece of broiled fish, (43) and he took it and ate in their presence. Acts 1:4, 10:41, Answer No. 2

Summary: Jesus Is Newly Embodied, Not A Ghost, Sui Generis

2) vv.43-49 SCRIPTURE, MESSAGE, MISSION, EMPOWERMENT.

a) vv.44-45 The Scripture Witnesses To Jesus And Requires Illumination. Formal

New Religious Experience Needs Scripture!

44 Then he said to them, 4:16-21, Risen Jesus Speaks About His Past Prophecies!

"These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you— 1:2, 9:22, Present, But Not "with" Them

45 that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." dei

Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, 24:13-35, Jesus As Author/Teacher, (Present)

b) vv.46-48 The Message And World Mission Require Authoritative Witnesses. Content

Suffering/ Death /Resurrection / Scripture/ Gift Of Spirit / Mission Are A Single Piece

46 and he said to them, Is. 53, Ps. 22, Jesus As Scripture's Final Interpreter, "It's About Me!"

"Thus it is written, 3rd Person, 1:4, 2:32, Assurance, Church's Message As O.T. Summary

47 that the Messiah is to suffer/ and to rise from the dead on the third day/, Ps. 16:8-10, 22, 69, Is. 52:13-53:12

47 and that repentance and forgiveness of sins/ is to be proclaimed/ in his name/ to all nations/, About Him! Acts

48 beginning from Jerusalem./ 7 Parts, Jesus' Trial Reopened: New Evidence! Acts 1:2, 8, 2:36, 3:17, 13:27

You are witnesses of these things. Eyewitnesses Know The Jesus Tradition (Present and Past)

Telling Follows Each Resurrection Scene, God Initiates The Mission

c) v.49 The Power For World Mission Comes From God As The Promised Holy Spirit.

Tradition + Appearances + Scripture = Not Enough, Spirit Needed!

49 And behold, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; 1:35, 3:16, 21-22; Acts 1:4,8, 5:32

so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." Metaphor, (Future)

Present As Holy Spirit Given To All At Pentecost

1') vv.50-53 DISAPPEARANCE AND RESPONSE: WORSHIP, JOY, AND BLESSING. //Acts 1:1-11

Departure Scene, Jesus Put Them Under God's Protection

50 a Then he led them out as far as Bethany, Travel Report Of Risen Lord! (Proof)

b and, lifting up his hands, HE BLESSED THEM. Blessed (Priestly: Ex. 17:11, 39:43)

51 b' While he was blessing them, Blessing (Lev. 9:22, Num. 6:23)

a' HE WITHDREW FROM THEM/ and was carried up into heaven. Travel Report Of Ascension 2 Kgs. 7:1-18

God Has Begun Reversal Of Current Order, Change Of Emotional Response

52 And they worshiped him (prostrated), and returned to Jerusalem WITH GREAT JOY; 4:5-8, Worshiped As Deity

53 and they were regularly in the temple blessing God. //1:8-9, Now They Understand! Obedient = Wait On Power

A Brief Treatment Of Luke 24:36-53

The last thought unit of Luke falls into three paragraphs. A third appearance- this time to a large group- is reported (vv.36-37); the nature of the resurrection body is clarified against misreadings (vv.38-42); Jesus announces himself as Scripture's fulfillment (vv.44-45), summarizes the church's message and mission (vv.46-48), promises the Spirit (v.49) and makes his departure in ascension as the disciples are filled with joyful worship (vv.50-53). The surface structure is a 3:1 concentric pattern with the appearance and disappearance of Jesus at the frames (1. vv.36-42 // 1' vv.50-53) and instructions on scriptural fulfillment and the gift of the Spirit at the center (2. vv.43-49). Several inclusions (*Jesus himself stood among them // he withdrew from them, Peace be with you // and he blessed them, joy // with great joy*) mark the beginning and end. Inclusions typically include identical terms but may contain synonyms and contrasts (e.g. *terrified* [v.37] v. *joy* [v.52]). The literary form is a recognition scene in four parts: testing (v.36), deception (v.37), foretelling (vv.44-49), and recognition (vv.52-53). Jesus' identity and mission are clarified, and the disciples get it! He has led them from ignorance to knowledge as a competent revealer.

We begin with a surprise arrival of the risen Jesus in the midst of a testimony meeting about his two prior appearances (vv.30-35). To discuss what others experienced is one thing; to have him pop in from the invisible world is terrifying. Luke simply says he *stood among them* with a greeting of *Peace be with you* as an assurance. Because of widespread cultural ideas regarding interaction with the world beyond death, the reflexive idea is that a spirit or ghost has appeared. This error is corrected in two parallel examples (vv.38-40, vv.41-42) of post-resurrection instruction which clarify the transformed nature of Jesus' new physicality; he surpasses all expectations. The form is question and answer. To Jesus' initial double question, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?" the answer is to demonstrate continuity of identity through wounds and tangibility. They are invited to *look, touch, and see*. In effect Jesus says, "It's still me." To his second question, "Have you anything to eat?" his response is to eat since ghosts typically do not. Jesus is corporeal and transformed, one of a kind. The whole of his person has been redeemed by God as a prototype, and so it shall be for us. Grace fulfills nature.

The central section contains three speeches (vv.44-45, 46-48, 49), each of which opens with a verbal cue: "Then he said to them," "And he said to them," "Behold." Jesus continues as teacher. The first topic is that he is the prime subject of Scripture. What began in his first sermon (4:16-21) continues. The Scriptures are illumined when Jesus is the lens through which they are read. This is the hermeneutical key: *the one who fulfills controls the reading*. The second speech moves from past to future. What happened in Jesus is the substance of God's offer of a new and healed relationship, first to those in Jerusalem most responsible for his mistreatment, then beyond the Jews to the whole of the Gentile world: *to all nations*. Jesus is ground zero for a world mission of reconciliation. But knowing how to read Scripture and having the correct message are not enough. The same personal power that indwelt Jesus must indwell them: the Holy Spirit. They need an indwelling that empowers. This is the promise of v.49. They must wait on his gift before the mission commences. He has now opened their minds to his new status and the deep truths they have witnessed across his life. They are fully instructed; spiritual activation is just ahead

That Jesus travels to Bethany with followers is an added indicator he is not ghostly. In the posture of a priest, he places them under God's protection. Jesus fulfills the meanings of the temple cultus; he is the place of God's dwelling. The double phrase *he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven* tells where he is not (no longer with us) and where he now resides (with God). That he has been so completely vindicated is a source of worship and joy. Jesus is given divine honors. Now they must wait.

A NEW BEGINNING

“... so stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

A self-propelled church is a contradiction; we need the Spirit’s power.

L U K E 2 4 : 4 9 a

The bodily resurrection of Jesus¹ and its implications never cease to fascinate me. I ride by silent cemeteries and imagine the great day of resurrection, the ground erupting and exploding in all directions. What a sight! I talk with an addict whose every cell craves narcotics and pray that a dose of resurrection grace will put them on the road to freedom and self-control. I stand beside cancer-infested bodies in intensive-care units with death hovering near and wonder what they will look like after receiving the resurrection embrace of Jesus Christ. The limbs of the amputee restored, the mind of the damaged made new, total restoration in a new form of embodied life within the kingdom of God as this world is made new and healed from top to bottom at a time of God’s choosing. All the long history of sin peeled away as so much dead skin, the malignant effects of evil cut away as divine life moves in to heal every wound of creation so that all life thrives in the immediate presence of the Lord and giver of life, as Isaiah saw and wrote, “They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for *the earth* shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea,”² which is another way of saying *totally*. As water covers the sea and blue the heavens and green the grass and wonder the face of a fascinated child, so shall God’s glory be *over* all the earth and *in* all the earth and *through* all the earth. What God made and called good shall be healed, and in Jesus’ resurrection we get a glimpse of what’s ahead. If one small piece has already been so transformed, and that small but important piece is Jesus, then it is possible for the whole.

¹ On this point U.M. Doctrine is clear. Article III of the United Methodist “Articles of Religion” reads: “Christ did truly rise again from the dead, *and took again his body* (ital. ad.), with all things pertaining to the perfection of man’s nature, wherewith he ascended into heaven, and there sitteth until he return to judge all men at the last day” (*Book of Discipline 2012*, 64).

² 11:9.

Heaven- as I have come to see it- is a pleasant pause between two worlds, both of which are right here.³ Heaven is a great vacation with God picking up the tab for all his kids, but heaven as eternally disembodied spirits in a world above is not our destination and therefore not our goal. I don't worry about it; it's an issue I settled year's ago. I belong to Jesus as his disciple, and so my life after death is secured. I am his problem, and I am trusting him to deal with me mercifully. To use crudely spatial language, we go *up to heaven* at death, then *back down to a new heavens and new earth* when the long project of history yields to the kingdom of God. This is why the great Creeds end as they do, not with everyone living happily forever as immortal souls in heaven but with *the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting*, or- as the Nicene Creed states with greater precision, *We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.*⁴

Your spirit being re clothed in a resurrection body is necessary to your existence in the new world of God's kingdom.⁵ You can't be there without one.⁶ Our being spirits without bodies in heaven after death is- in a sense- unnatural for us humans and therefore temporary, meaning it is succeeded by our being re-embodied in a resurrection body like that of Jesus now on display at God's right hand. He is presently the sole existent prototype, but on that day they will be mass produced. You will always be you, and always recognizable. Jesus took his history with him as seen in his wounds, and so will you, but it will be in a marvelous new body fit for the new creation. The goal of this grand faith is not so much to get you into heaven at death as to get heaven into you now so that you can be an agent of the kingdom of God while you live here below; only then is your future secure.

Life has basically four parts. Life was going on long before you arrived- part one. You were then thrust without vote into the flow of a fallen world- a mixed bag

³ On the early Christian vision of a two-stage, post-mortem existence (first heaven, then the kingdom), see N.T. Wright, *Surprised By Hope* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2008), 13-30.

⁴ For an exposition of this climactic topic, see Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Creed* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2003), 285-295.

⁵ This is the point of Paul's discussion in 2 Cor. 5. about being *re clothed*.

⁶ 1 Cor. 15:50, "I tell you this, brethren: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable."

of joy and sorrow, life and death, good- but not always pleasant- and rarely fair. That's part two, and it is in this life that we either respond to or resist God's grace and call to become a new kind of person by following Jesus. Then at death, the believer- now without a body which remains behind- is ushered into the other part of creation, the part presently invisible to us, most often called *heaven*- part three. For a word picture, think of the software of a computer being separated from the hardware which eventually rusts and corrodes down to nothing. Then, at resurrection the same software- your personality, your soul, the you that is most truly you- is download onto a new piece of amazing hardware.

In heaven, in our temporary quarters above, we know one another; we are forgiven, and there is real joy and new understanding, but good as it promises to be we are not yet home in the full sense because we unclothed- without a body. Good as heaven is, the earth- God's good and beautiful creation- is not yet healed. When you die, nothing much changes; the world goes right on in its ecstasies and agonies. You exited, having lived out your days in a one-of-a-kind human life with some influence, but no real changes. Sin and evil continue their awful distortions in your absence. But when God chooses, and that is where history ends, heaven is coming down to envelop and transform all that is- part four.⁷ What is presently invisible shall become visible and assert its power over all that is as God's government- the place where his good and loving will is done without challenge- moves from heaven downstairs to earth. Remember the prayer? "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, *on earth as it is in heaven.*" This is when it happens; this is the moment we receive powerful new resurrection bodies like Jesus, fully human, fully ourselves, only with the marvelous new properties to function within the new realm. The risen Jesus appears- still with holes in his flesh from the nails and the spear; he spoke, ate, could be touched, and traveled with his disciples to Bethany; but, he also appeared out of and disappeared back into the invisible world from which he came, which is a feat not possible for us, at least not yet.⁸ What would it mean to be magnificently human, suffused with God's glory, fully alive to love and wisdom, and yet to exceed the current limits of space and time? Get ready. It's coming your way!

What will it be like to blink and appear at the far end of the universe? To step in and out of different dimensions? To pass through solid objects? To fly. To know

⁷ Revelation 21:1-8.

⁸ N.T. Wright, *Simply Jesus* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2011), 191-195.

pleasures so total and exquisite that the highest human ecstasy is only prelude? To love the whole creation from the inside out as God does? What will it be like to go from glory to glory and for each layer to fulfill the last in more wonderful ways? For now this frail flesh is held captive by sin and blinded by ignorance, but then our very flesh and all our dormant brain cells will be saturated and enlivened by God's Holy Spirit, and we will be embodied anew beyond death's awful power.⁹ We will carry the wisdom of the old and the innocence of the child in one new heart. And you will say to yourself, "I remember the Sunday Pastor Phil told us this stuff. I had trouble believing him it seems so fantastic, but now I understand. He was a man ahead of his time! He was thinking *in the future tense*."

I see the world through Easter eyes and resurrection lenses, and it makes me a bit of an oddball and out-of-sync with the way things are. So when you use so-called *real-world* arguments with me, I will listen; I also promise not be too impressed. What you are describing is not *the real world* but the *current arrangements of a fallen world* which will one day be surpassed and is already being actively undermined. A new world is already on the way, and the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the first and most important sign of its present and coming power. Christians live now by the power of the future, and we seek to import as much of it into the present as our tentative structures of life can contain. After all, what is prayer but the cry for God to send some of the new stuff down to us ahead of time? "Thy kingdom come; thy will be done, on earth as it is I heaven."

So when we whisper, "It's just too good to believe," we are not alone but in the company of the apostles themselves on Easter evening: v.41, "While *in their joy they were disbelieving* and still wondering..." And if they had trouble with this stuff, we should not be too hard on ourselves. To use current lingo, resurrection calls for a major *paradigm shift*. All the mental furniture must be rearranged, all the fundamental questions rethought in light of this single new fact, this one-time event without analogy, this window into God's healing strategy for all of creation, not

⁹ In spite of an imprecise translations as "spiritual body" (RSV), this is the meaning of *soma pneumatikon* in I Cor. 15:44, 46 in contrast to *soma psychikon* (literally "a soulish body"). The contrast is not physical body v. spiritual body (meaning "nonmaterial"), but a contrast between a body enlivened by soul compared with body enlivened by Spirit. Thus a "spiritual body" is not less bodily but one animated by a different power (the Holy Spirit) and thus with new capacities. What Paul presents analytically, Luke presents through a narrative with Jesus as prototype.

creation canceled, not creation destroyed, but creation transformed and healed, with the crucified and risen Jesus as *Exhibit A*.¹⁰

During his ministry Jesus called back the dead, as if he reached his arm into jail and pulled them back out on the street. But when he died, he was not pulled back into this life but drawn out of death on the other side into new resurrection life by the cooperation of the Father and the Spirit, and it is from that new state that he steps in and out of our world. Jesus’ resurrection and its implications never ceases to fascinate me. It is the fulfillment of every good and beautiful thing you’ve ever wished; that it happened to Jesus and no one else gives him unique status.

The Body Transformed (v.36-43)

I see no way to explain the extraordinary rise of the Christian church apart from the resurrection of Jesus. From a handful of followers to essentially coopting the Roman Empire in three centuries; that quite a feat!¹¹ Sociology charts the unfolding path but not the originating impulse. Ours is a movement with a surprising act of God as its center. Everything hinges on the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth which left behind the negative evidence of an empty tomb, then offered the positive evidence of multiple, tangible appearances to individuals and groups. And if you argue the various accounts cannot be exactly harmonized, I agree and respond this only increases credibility since it shows there was no conspiracy to issue one official account.¹² How could there be? What the language of resurrection points to is a categorically new experience, a meeting with someone who’s been taken through death and sent back, not as a ghost or spirit or apparition, but as a fully human,

¹⁰ On the multiple implications, see Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, Chapters 12-15.

¹¹ For a history, see Jonathan Hill, *Christianity: How A Tiny Sect From A Despised Religion Came To Dominate The Roman Empire* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 2011); for a sociological read, see Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World's Largest Religion* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2011).

¹² For a thorough discussion, see Hugo Staudiger, *The Trustworthiness of the Gospels* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Handsel, 1981). Also Darrell Bock, *Who Is Jesus: Linking the Historical Jesus With The Christ of Faith* (New York, NY: Howard, 2012), Chapter 13, “The Women Discover An Empty Tomb,” 192-194 where arguments applied to the tomb also apply to the resurrection stories. Collusion is ruled out.

radically transformed person.¹³ There they were, discussing the appearances at Emmaus and to Peter, when all of a sudden he stood in their midst! Verse 36: “While they were talking about this, *Jesus himself stood among them....*”

This is what the resurrection stories report again and again. Jesus dropped in on them! The only adequate name for what he displayed was *resurrection*, which in first century Jewish parlance meant much more than the resuscitation of a cadaver back to life this side of death. It also meant more than the simple continuation of life after death. It meant that the ultimate fix for all that ails us has begun, if only in one man. Creation is being liberated and transformed with Jesus as the leading edge.¹⁴

A five year little boy was making his first rail trip. When the train sped into a tunnel and darkness enveloped the coach, he lost his breath in fear. But when the train quickly cleared the tunnel, and there was daylight again, he erupted, “It’s tomorrow today!”¹⁵

That is what the early church had a glimpse of in Jesus’ appearances. The tomorrow of God’s kingdom invaded their today. They now knew what was ahead, not in all the intervening details of the messy interactions of history, but they knew that love was stronger than death, that the immortality of the soul was not the whole truth, that the work of Jesus among them had not ended but kicked into overdrive after a brief pause, that whatever happened to them they were safe with God, that God would use them to spread the good news of repentance and forgiveness to the whole world, and that the energy to do it would come from outside themselves in the person of the Holy Spirit, their companion and counselor.

On occasion I hear reports from people who’ve had encounters with dead loved ones. People often hide such experiences lest they be thought crazy. Some are while asleep and may be rightly called *dreams*; others are during waking consciousness and may be termed *visions*. A smell of perfume or after-shave, a brush-by, a touch, an awareness of presence, and they turn to see a glimpse of someone dear to them, often

¹³ N.T. Wright often speaks of *transphysicality*.

¹⁴ For a discussion *contra* the now-defunct Jesus Seminar, see Luke Timothy Johnson, *Living Jesus: Learning the Heart of the Gospel* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), especially chapter 1, “He is the Living One,” 3-22.

¹⁵ Jones & Jones, *500 Illustrations* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 1998), 74.

wearing familiar clothing. The emotions range from terror to deep calm. Such phenomena were common in the ancient world as well, and there were categories to talk about such experiences.¹⁶ Verse 37, “They were startled and terrified, and *thought that they were seeing a spirit*” (which could either mean a ghost or an angel). They knew about such things and had descriptive language for it.

It’s why the resurrection greeting of Jesus is a blessing of peace, “Shalom. Peace be with you.” It’s what you say to those you love when they are scared to death. This is a high-voltage religious experience. And we should not be surprised that it dropped their minds and emotions in a blender. It was profoundly disorienting, as is true with all such numinous encounters at the border of two worlds, the visible and the invisible. Our normal day-to-day routine and consciousness cracks open to a larger reality. We are no longer in control but under the influence of a consciousness richer than our own. We find ourselves under close inspection.

This is why we both hunger for and fear primary religious experience. We were made for God, and yet to encounter God is for all my presuppositions about life to come under scrutiny. Sad as it is, Methodism in our day has largely become a church in which to hide from such encounters rather than a community that expects such encounters and knows how to nurture people in and through them with the inherited wisdom of spiritual direction. When our own people come back saying, “I went to this *other* church, and the most wonderful thing happened to me...” we need to examine ourselves to see if we have grieved the Holy Spirit.

Church is the location for primary religious experience. Verse 36: “While they were talking about this...” says Luke. It should be our experience that when we gather to *talk about this stuff*- this Jesus stuff, and especially on Sundays- that we sense his presence and even hear his living voice in the silence, in the reading and preaching of the Word, and through the variety of spiritual gifts and sacraments. If he is alive, he just might want to *mess with us* from time to time in ways that go beyond predictability. We worship a risen, living Jesus, not a dead hero who serves primarily as a moral example. If worship has becoming simply *doing our duty*, then it shows how far we have drifted from the originating conviction that this same Jesus is *alive* and liable to make himself known at any time. Surprise us, Lord! Let us

¹⁶ For a review, see Deborah Price Thompson, “The *Ghost* of Jesus: Luke 24 in Light of Ancient Narratives of Post-Mortem Apparitions,” JSNT 29.3 (2007) 287-301.

smell you and feel your hot breath against our neck. We need you!

Not everyone in first century Judaism believed in an afterlife, and even among those who did there was a variety of opinion. The Saducees denied the resurrection of the dead. Some Jews believed the old doctrine that after death people became dull shades of their former selves indwelling a shadowy place called *Sheol*.¹⁷ Some borrowed from Greek thinking the idea that the good soul as a spark of divine light had been imprisoned in a less-than-good body and was freed at death for disembodied immortality. The Pharisees, who held to the goodness of creation and the ultimate triumph of God’s justice, believed in the resurrection of the dead at the end of the age. It was God’s way of sorting things out and making things right at the end. But no one expected a single man to be raised before that time.¹⁸ And never having seen a living example, none knew quite what resurrection meant, though there was much speculation among the rabbis, some arguing God would use all the old materials and others that he would start afresh. There was a on-going debate in Jesus’ day about life after death, whether it was to be, and- if so, what form?

It was the followers of Jesus who after Easter had the experience and understanding to clarify some of the disputed matters. Yes, there is a personal afterlife; Jesus came back from there. The Saducees are wrong. No, it is not the shadows of Sheol or of some disembodied soul flitting around with other spiritual whatevers; it is not less than bodily but more so.¹⁹ No, we don’t become angels; we remain human beings. No, we don’t become someone else. There is continuity of personal identity; it’s still *us* with all our concrete specificity and individual history

¹⁷ I Samuel 28:8ff.

¹⁸ For a thorough discussion of these options, see N.T. Wright, “The Transforming Reality of the Body Resurrection,” in Marcus Borg and N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 112-115.

¹⁹ Jeffrey Burton Russell, *A History of Heaven* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 15: “Jewish tradition has always held that life in the other world is life in the body. Further, the much ignored fact is that neither the New Testament nor the early Christian writers ever used the term ‘immortal soul’ or ‘immortal spirit.’ The early Christians, like the rabbis, understood that union with God was union of the whole human, both soul and body, with him. Christian tradition continued to assume this union until, in the third century, Platonic ideals of the soul’s superiority to the body promoted the idea of the survival of souls apart from bodies.”

stored in our bodies and their history. Yes, we know each other and enjoy community, even eat together at the Messiah’s table. What that has to do with the children’s question of digestion and elimination is not yet revealed! Gender is maintained; it’s Jesus the male, but what that means for sexuality we do not know except that procreation is eliminated.²⁰ And Yes, many of the creaturely limits we now chafe against are removed. Jesus appeared and disappeared, not only indoors but outdoors, which means that space and time are not hard but soft realities. Here love and knowledge are forever joined in a seamless web. Jesus loved them; he came back with good news and gave them a show-and-tell session that is amazing to analyze.

Verses 38 through 42 are full of the language of emotion and the language of sight and touch, so vivid and concrete. Jesus acknowledged their fear and mental confusion, “Why are you *frightened*, and why do *doubts* arise in your hearts? *Look* at my hands and my feet; *see* that it is I myself, *touch me and see....*” Not a ghost, not a spirit, but a thoroughly glorified human being. They all knew from Jewish tradition that angels don’t eat, but Jesus did, so he’s not one of them but one of us.

Whole reams of theological and philosophical speculation crumble and are rearranged under the impact of this demonstration. Life eternal in the coming kingdom is not escape from this disease ridden bag of bones but its utter fulfillment while maintaining continuity of identity. You will always be you. Get used to it. Quit fantasizing about being someone else. Live your life; be who God has called you to be, so that when the end comes there will be something worth raising for God to show off in front of the angels, “Here, Gabriel; look at this trophy of grace!”

We Christians are the most materialistic of all religions. We do not flee from creation to find God. We pray with eyes and mind open and with hands held with other believers in community. The God who became flesh in Jesus Christ will save flesh, his and ours, in wonderful ways beyond imagination. All the great creeds affirm that the transformed physicality of Jesus is honored at the right hand of God. And if that is our future, it is full of implications for how we regard our bodies now. If they have such a glorious future, they are not to be used for purposes that bring harm to ourselves or others. Before you dismiss another person and treat them as an object instead of a person, ask a question, What does the promised resurrection say about the value God places upon them?

²⁰ Luke 20:27-40.

Back To The Classroom (vv.43-49)

My reading of church history is that whenever renewal has come to the church, three things are in place: 1) a Christ centered reading of the Bible, 2) a clarity about the essentials of faith and the privilege of missions, and 3) an utter reliance on Holy-Spirit-power instead of merely human-generated programs.

This should come as no surprise since it is the explicit teaching of the risen Lord in verses 43 thru 49. When we tend to what he says, things happen, and when we don't we have the unenviable task of trying to keep the church running on our own. Jesus was a teacher, and it should not surprise us that once he had dealt with the issue of the identity and nature of his resurrection body, he should turn to the central matters for phase two of his ministry through the church, which we read about in Luke's second volume, the Book of Acts.

My observation is also that when any one of these three is de-emphasized, the church is weakened. When Scripture is marginalized, as it has been historically among Roman Catholics and more recently by liberal Protestants, what takes its place is either church tradition for the Catholics or the intellectual and social fads of the culture for liberal Protestants. When the Bible and the creeds are moved from the center, something else will take its place as the working authority. The vacuum will not remain unfilled. But when renewal begins to stir, there is a new hunger among the people for Christ to open their minds to understand the Scriptures. A church with many opportunities for Bible study is a church that is gathering kindling to start a holy fire. Verse 45, "Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures." We study the Scriptures not primarily to amass religious knowledge but to know him!²¹ In Bible study we pursue the mind of Christ and pray that he illumine our way. We find his footprints in the law of Moses, in the preaching of the prophets, and in the lyrics of the psalms. He is everywhere waiting for us to search him out.

Second issue: when the call to conversion and new life through repentance and forgiveness is marginalized, we end up with churches full of people whose religious experience is second hand. They have no motivation for mission because Christ has not made much of a difference in their life, and so they have little to export. They

²¹ See Chris Webb, *The Fire of the Word: Meeting God on Holy Ground* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 2011); Richard Foster, *Life With God: Reading The Bible For Spiritual Transformation* (SanFrancisco, CA: HarperOne, 2008).

inherited the faith with mom’s china and see the church as the upholder of moral values and not much else. Unconverted insiders: the church is full of such people.

There are at least six separate affirmations in verse 46 through 48, and not one can be removed without changing the entire ecology of Christian conviction.²² Jesus the Messiah suffers, freely entering into death. He is raised by God and now works through his church so that people across the street and across the globe can turn from their many false gods to the one true God and be restored to his fellowship through forgiveness, which removes the inherited and actual blockage of their sin. Church is God’s great homecoming. We are to proclaim it, not in our name but in *his name*, the name of Jesus. The center point is Jerusalem, but the circumference is all the nations.²³ And if you know the forgiveness of your sins and enjoy a healed relationship with God, then you have the privilege of sharing the gift. And if you don’t know it, then you need some help. Nothing is more basic than that you know you are forgiven and have a deep inward assurance of the same. It is the birthright of every believer to know you are forgiven and have peace with God.²⁴

There is no hope for the renewal of our church apart from a restored conviction about the centrality of Jesus Christ leading to a restored passion to spend and be spent in evangelism and missions. There are some here today God is calling to leave your current occupation and offer yourself for missionary service. So that when Jesus said, “You are witnesses of these things,” he was placing them under a solemn obligation to tell his story in the specific form of *turning from* and *turning to*, of repentance and forgiveness. Sin is an issue for everyone. No one is ever saved apart from Jesus Christ who heals our relationship with God. The Son has come, filled with the Spirit, to lead us back to the Father. The trail is marked, and the price has already been paid!

People that you know are lost, and you must earn the conviction through study and prayer to speak to them directly about the state of their life. Don’t ask me to witness to them; you are their friend; you are their family member; you speak to them! You fumble through the tough questions. You open the Bible and search for answers.

²² “These verses are a distillation of Luke’s theology” (Donald Senior, *The Passion of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke* [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1989], 157).

²³ Acts 1:8.

²⁴ On the Wesleyan teaching on assurance, see Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 2007), 136-137, 303-304.

What a sad thing that someone could be in the church and Sunday School for decades and still not be able to share their faith in a way that makes sense to an unbeliever. Ask about our job or hobby and we can talk for hours. Ask about Christ and we become tongue-tied and call for a professional. How did we create such dependency?

God is at work in this church. Get in on it. Mission opportunities are everywhere around us. When we forget the basics of theology and the imperative of missions, we become ingrown and folksy, more concerned about manners and standards than about the truths of the faith and the fate of the lost. Let's keep our buildings up, but let's also remember what they are for, and that is to be filled with children and adults who are on their way to becoming followers of Jesus Christ!

The third essential for church health is found in verse 49, the power of the Holy Spirit. Here the idea of an *unfunded mandate* is helpful. Someone in Washington or Columbia issues a regulation and passes it down to the local level without the requisite funding to make it happen. I define frustration as a “*have to* without a *how to* and no *help to*.” Jesus did not give the church an unfunded mandate. The Scriptures were now open to them; information was no problem. The message and mission was before them, and of its essential facts they were first hand witnesses. They knew what they needed to know and where they need to go, yet Jesus himself told them it was not enough. He set them up. Something was missing, and deliberately so. The church can't run on information, even true information from God. All my study and preaching is useless and a waste of both our times unless God does something with it through the power of the Holy Spirit.

My deep fear is that if the Holy Spirit was to abandon most of our churches, little would change because much of what we are doing does not require the power of God anyway. We love to plan, but we are not so skilled at the disciplines of prayerful waiting and worshiping. We are American pragmatists who want to *get on with business*, forgetting that the holy and Triune God is our business, and that until we see prayer and worship as glorious ends in themselves we are not much use to God. God will not allow himself to be used for our organizational survival, nationally or locally. I did not come here to rescue this church. I can't. It ain't in me. I came to serve God's people as a faithful pastor and to preach Jesus Christ in all his offices. Our inherited Methodist heresy is to think that if can just get the structure right and the committees organized and *The Book of Discipline* clear that we can recover the glory days when we were a powerful movement of God wining converts by the thousands and planting churches across the land. Not so. Whatever organizational

gifts we possess, they are byproduct of the revival from which we originated and not its cause, which was the sovereign move of the Holy Spirit taking a stuffy Oxford don named John Wesley and putting him in the streets of England offering Christ.

“And behold,” said Jesus, “I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here *in the city of Greenwood* until you have been clothed with power from on high.” That’s how I hear verse 49. Stay here! Take our location seriously. Wait and watch! Main Street Church will either study the Scriptures, engage in missions, and welcome the renewing winds of the Holy Spirit, or we will slowly die while God goes elsewhere to find others do his work. God help us! Teach us to wait and to worship and to listen for the winds. Let us fall in love with you again, O Lord.

His Parting Posture (vv.50-53)

We began this exploration with an appearance and response; we close with a disappearance and response in verses 50 through 53. “Then he led them out as far as Bethany.” One more little road trip together, same as the triumphant entry, only in reverse, not into the city but out towards the world. Now and forever, they will be his disciples, and their highest dignity is to continue to follow him, one step at a time. Christian faith is personal allegiance to Jesus in the company of his other followers and in pursuit of his mission. It was not in the temple as a Levite or priest that he blessed them, but *out on the road* that he placed them under the Father’s protection. And then, just as he had dropped in, he was gone again, and there they stood bubbling with new life and restored hope. Where he had gone this time they could not follow. Jesus is exalted and ascended into the mystery of the Triune God, and soon he will send to them fire from heaven.

Conclusion

From emotional terror to intellectual confusion, then to deep joy: this was their emotional journey since Jesus dropped in. Something wonderful had happened to him, and now they were all caught up in it together. Because their friend had kept every other promise, they were content to hang around Jerusalem, blessing God in the temple and waiting together in prayer until the mystery of the Spirit’s power came upon them. I don’t like waiting, but sometimes God says, “Wait!” I like doing stuff and staying busy, but sometimes God says, “Seek me first.” God has work to do in Greenwood and around the world, and we are to be part of it.
