

**+ Luke 24:44-53 + The Resurrection Life: Sent Out, But Not Alone +
+ 7th Sunday of Easter: Ascension of Our Lord + 17 May 2015 +**

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

“It’s all done...” Isn’t it nice to finally get something done, to finally finish that difficult project or time-consuming paper or that dreaded test? Doesn’t relief wash over you when you finally complete a complicated job or a pile of paperwork or when the painful labor is finally over?

It’s nice to look back on the effort that was put into that project or paper or job or task. It’s nice to pause for a moment to enjoy what’s been done, to appreciate what you went through, to relax a little because you’re finally on the long-awaited “other side.” After a hard job is done, it might even be cause for celebration like we do for graduations or promotions. Sometimes, though, you and I need to pause to take it all in, to realize what’s really happened and how we actually got to this point.

That’s the way it was for Jesus’ disciples on Easter evening. It had been a roller coaster of a week from the heights of hosannas on Palm Sunday to the depths of betrayal on Thursday night to suffering and death on Friday to the rising joy of an empty tomb on Easter Sunday morning.

Then suddenly the living Jesus was standing among them, and they were on the other side. No more mobs. No more threats. No more suffering and death. No more shame or fear. At that moment, it was too much for the disciples to take in. After all, Jesus had breathed his last only three days before, but there he was eating and talking with them in the flesh—alive!

Once Jesus finished his broiled fish and the disciples had picked their jaws off the floor, Jesus gave his weary disciples an opportunity to pause for a moment and take in everything that had happened in the past week. Jesus wanted them to look back and understand what he had accomplished and why it all had to happen as it did. He wanted them to realize that the hard work was truly and finally done. ***“This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.”***

Jesus wanted his disciples to see that the Scriptures had been fulfilled—every promise, every foreshadowing detail, all fulfilled. Then to help them truly understand what had happened, Jesus ***“opened their minds.”*** ***“This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day...”*** Jesus had fulfilled the Scriptures. Jesus had paid the required price for the sins of the entire world with his own life on the cross, but then Jesus had conquered death. It was all done. There was nothing else left for Jesus to do. He had completely carried out his purpose in coming to this world. The hard work of saving the world was finally done.

Of course, the disciples could find relief and appreciation for what it took to get them to the other side, but they weren’t really done, were they? Neither are we. It almost always happens when you finally finish a difficult task or job or assignment that the question begs to be asked, “Now what? What’s next?” It was no different with the living Jesus and his disciples.

With the living Jesus standing in their midst and opening their minds to the Scriptures, what would happen next? For Jesus, it was time to visibly return home to heaven. Oh, he would still remain with his disciples, but his work on this earth was done. For his disciples, however, their new work was just beginning because they were about to be sent out.

“This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.” So what is that new task that Jesus gives to all who follow him? Take his good news to the ends of the earth. Now how are we going to do that? With what does Jesus equip us? It’s really a simple, straightforward message—Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

It’s a message of repentance, a message that confronts us with our sins. Why is it that Jesus had to suffer and die in the first place? It certainly wasn’t for his own sins. After all, Jesus is the sinless Son of God! So why suffer the ultimate indignity of death? Jesus suffered for your sins. He suffered for mine. He paid the price for those times when you and I have failed him like those cowering disciples on Easter evening, when you have quietly hidden your Christian faith to avoid the pressure or ridicule of friends or co-workers or classmates, when you have betrayed Jesus to chase after the cheap thrills of a temptation, or when you have doubted him

in an hour of need. Jesus suffered for our sins, when we deserved it. He suffered your death. He suffered my death and the hell we all deserve.

That message of God's holy Law crushes our hearts. My sins and yours put Jesus on the cross. My guilt and yours brought him death and put his lifeless body in a borrowed tomb, but the message Jesus sends out with us is above all, a message of forgiveness. Yes, sweet forgiveness earned with the holy, precious blood of Christ. Sweet forgiveness for every single sin paid with the life of Christ on the cross. Sweet forgiveness sealed and guaranteed with Christ's resurrection from the dead.

The Jesus who died is the same Jesus who now lives eternally. This Jesus conquered death and won the victory over sin and Satan and hell for you and me. This Jesus shattered doubt when he abandoned his tomb with the reality that he is alive. This Jesus overcame weakness when he rose from the dead and proved that he is truly in control of all things.

This Jesus opened the gates of heaven with his resurrection so we might have a place where no evil, no fear, no death can get us. This Jesus proved his undying love when he allowed nothing to stop him from saving us, and this Jesus gives us real peace in a world and hearts clearly without peace.

That Jesus, triumphant and forgiving, now sends us and all his disciples back out into the world. That message of ***"repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations..."*** Where? ***"All nations"***? Now that doesn't mean that right after church you should board a plane and fly to the other side of the world to tell people about Jesus. Maybe someday the Lord will give you that opportunity, but in the meantime, he says, ***"...beginning at Jerusalem."*** In fact, Luke shares more of what Jesus means in Acts 1(:8), ***"You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."***

For Jesus' disciples on that Easter evening, their Gospel sharing, their "witnessing" would start right there in the city of Jerusalem with people they knew and met, but then they and others would take the Gospel farther out. Like water rippling out from a stone dropped in the middle of a pond, the message of Christ crucified and risen would ripple out to the surrounding communities and regions. Then it would go even farther as congregations would send missionaries to take Jesus to places where the Gospel had never gone, eventually rippling out ***"to the ends of the earth."***

So how does that apply to you and me? If Jesus sends us out, where do we go? How do we reach the nations? His plan hasn't changed. If the stone of the Gospel drops in the pond here, that means you and I are the ones to take it out to our own personal ***"Jerusalem"***—to our homes, our neighborhoods, our workplaces, our playgrounds and gyms and backyards.

...But it doesn't stop there! Even if we reach all those places, we're not done yet, because Jesus wants his good news to keep going. Where are our ***"Judea and Samaria"***? Jesus uses us to take the Gospel to our communities. For example, there are over 85,000 people within 5 miles of our church! They all need to hear about Jesus! Then we take that Gospel to other neighboring communities, then to the 600,000+ people in our county, and elsewhere in central New York, but we don't stop there either. Through us, our Lord has already started mission congregations in Rochester and Watertown. So what about the Southern Tier or the Finger Lakes or Utica/Rome or other places where the Gospel needs to go?

...But even then, the Gospel doesn't stop there! Working together with other congregations across North America as part of a synod, we send pastors and teachers and missionaries to places we cannot go in other states, other countries, and other continents—***"to the ends of the earth."*** Yet it all starts here as you and I share the saving name of Jesus.

Thankfully Jesus promises to provide help for us with this enormous task. Like his disciples, Jesus opens our minds to ***"understand the Scriptures"*** through the regular study of his Word. After all, how can you be a witness if you can't recall what you've seen and heard? Through that Word, Jesus assures us that we're not alone. He's still with us, and through that Word, the Holy Spirit clothes us with power from on high, removing those fears, silencing the urge to hold back in silence, and giving us the words to say.

So when do we go? For the first disciples, they started forty days after Easter. ***"When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven."*** After another ten days of worshiping and praying and preparing, Jesus granted his promised gift of the Holy Spirit. No more time for them to rest because Jesus' work was done. Now the new phase of his work was just beginning through them.

Like the disciples we worship and praise and pray. We prepare with hearts looking forward to the Day when he will return, but there's no time to rest. Now is the time to take Jesus to our world. Now is the time to proclaim repentance and forgiveness. Now is the time, because we have no guarantee of tomorrow. Now is the time, because Jesus has done all the hard work for us. ***"You are witnesses of these things."*** The living Jesus has ascended to the right hand of God the Father almighty to rule all things for us. He equips you. He is with you, and now he sends you out. **Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!** Amen.