

In Sacramento As It Is In Heaven

Luke 24:36-49

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ September 22, 2019 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

³⁶ While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” ³⁷ They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. ³⁸ He said to them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? ³⁹ Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” ⁴⁰ And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. ⁴¹ While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” ⁴² They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³ and he took it and ate in their presence.

⁴⁴ Then he 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.” ⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶ and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” (Luke 24:36-49, NRSV)



In a way, today is the end of a journey. Since January of 2018 we have been journeying through the Gospel of Luke. That’s nearly two years! I was reminded this week that the journey was prompted by voices in our congregation back then calling for the preaching here to be relevant. God’s clear response to me at the time was that there is nothing more relevant, in any age or any place, than the gospel.

I want to commend you for your willingness to go on this journey. The commitment at the beginning was that we would preach through every passage in Luke all the up to the passion narrative which begins in chapter 22. We have now done that. Honestly, there were a few passages along the way that I wanted to skip over, and probably at least few that some of you wished we would have skipped. We didn’t. And Christ has been

faithful. His Word never fails to meet us where we are and show us the truth, expose our rebellion, correct our mistakes, and train us to live the way Jesus would live if he were in our shoes.¹

Today I want to cap this journey with this passage from the resurrection accounts in Luke 24. And once again, as has been true all along the way, there is nothing more relevant for us than the message we find here.

The disciples are gathered together in Jerusalem. It’s late Sunday night but nobody can sleep after the extraordinary events of the weekend. The tomb where Jesus’ corpse was laid on Friday is now empty. Nobody can find the body. Some of the women are telling this wild story about meeting angels outside the empty tomb who declared Jesus was no longer dead. Two of the disciples have just returned from Emmaus where, on the road into town they say Jesus mysteriously appeared to them and then, just as mysteriously disappeared. It’s all they can talk about. What are they to make of it all?

And then suddenly there he is, standing among them. And before they can say a thing he speaks. “Peace,” he says. “Peace be with you.” He doesn’t introduce himself. He doesn’t scold them for their disbelief, their denial, their desertion, their doubt. He just declares peace. I love this. For a moment imagine what it would be like to meet Jesus face to face this morning. What would he say to you? What would the first words out of his mouth be? “I’m really disappointed in you...” “I don’t even know you...” “Why have you been living this way...” “Why can’t you...” What if Jesus met you this morning and simply said to you, “Peace. Peace be with you. All is well, especially between me and you. All will be well in the end.” Can you imagine? It makes me wonder if the first words spoken by Jesus to any person who truly seeks him are these words: “Peace be with you.” It’s as much a declaration as it is an assurance.

I believe that Jesus was declaring to these men and women, and to those disciples who would follow them, that this was the new reality. Because of what had taken place that weekend, his death on the cross for the sin of the world and his rising from the grave to overcome death – sin and death vanquished! – because

¹ See II Timothy 3:16

of this peace is now possible between heaven and earth for all who will receive it. And this is not just some sort of mystic reality; this is flesh and blood reality standing there in their midst!

The disciples, naturally, are terrified. They think they are seeing a ghost. If you went to the funeral of a loved one on Friday, watched them bury the person in the ground at the cemetery, and then suddenly that person appeared in living color at your dinner table Sunday evening, you'd freak out too! So Jesus moves quickly to quiet their fears, and their doubts. **“Look at my hands and my feet... Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.”**

Then he asks for some food to eat. In those days it was a common belief that ghosts neither ate nor drank. So Jesus takes the fish and eats it right in front of them. This is no ghost.

You know, when you lose a loved one there is nothing you want more than to have that person back with you. In fact, we so desperately want to believe that that person is still with us in some way that we can look for evidence to confirm our longing. A shooting star crosses the sky at the very moment we are looking up missing him. She loved butterflies and on her next birthday a butterfly lands on our shoulder when we are out the garden she used to love. And who knows? I'm not going to say that God is not at work in those instances. But there have been people, even today, who have suggested that the disciples so badly wanted Jesus to be back with them that what we have recorded by Luke here is mere wishful thinking, or perhaps a wild figment of their imagination. But you can't touch a wish. You can't feed a figment of your imagination. This is Jesus, flesh and bone, physically raised from the grave.

In those days the Greek notion of the immortality of the soul permeated the ancient world. The idea was that a human soul or spirit came into a body at birth but then left the body for good at death. The body then, wasn't really a part of the person. It was more like this hyper-customized Uber ride that the soul picked up to travel 70 or 80 years through the world and then discarded when the ride was over.² This idea, by the way, is still very prevalent in our day, even in the church. But everything about the New Testament contradicts this notion, especially here in this scene in Luke. This is Jesus, the *same* Jesus who was born in the manger in Bethlehem, taught by the sea in Galilee, healed the blind man along the road, and died three days before on the cross. This is the *same* Jesus standing among them

flesh and bone. The theological implications of this one fact are as relevant as they are profound.

First, God obviously cares about this *physical* world. The universe is God's creation born out of love. And he still loves it! The physical world, of course, is broken beyond belief, even cursed. But it is not God's plan to do away with what he has made. His plan is to redeem it, to renew it, to restore it.

I bought a Black and Decker trimmer over 20 years ago. I used that thing to trim and edge my lawn for all those years. I got my money's worth. But this last spring time finally took its toll. The guide on the bottom fell off somewhere so the edges were never straight. The cord wouldn't stay connected and so the power kept cutting out. The plastic line wouldn't feed out the bottom very well and kept getting snagged. I could go on but I'm already boring you. The point is, a few months ago I had a little ceremony at the dumpster, said a few words of thanks and appreciation, and then tossed my old tool into the trash. A few tears were shed – until, that is, I tried out my new Black and Decker 6.5 amp Power Command trimmer with push-button line feed and a cord retention system. My grief evaporated.

Here's my point. Unlike us, God never throws things away. Ever. You might say that God is the great recycler, taking what is used up, broken down, corrupt, even dead, and making it new again. And not just new like before, to the original state, but new to a whole other level. Remember, Jesus taught us to pray, “Thy kingdom come, they will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” He meant it. God's plan has never been to take us out of this world to heaven but to bring heaven to earth, and in the physical resurrected body of Jesus we see the first fruits of what God intends to do with all creation, eventually renewing the world in a whole new material that is no longer subject to death and decay.

Many of us are very concerned with the state of the natural world. Thousands of young people skipped school this past Friday to march and demonstrate for the sake of our environment. None of us, however, cares us much about this physical world as God does. It's *his* world! Rivers and oceans, mountains and deserts, planets and stars, plants and animals, there will come a day when all of it is restored in the way that Jesus' body was restored at Easter. New creation!

But it gets better! Human beings are the centerpiece of this restoration. That's the second implication here. God did not come to earth as a lion or an eagle. He did not come in the wind or the waves. He didn't even come as a spirit, or a voice, or a presence, or a dream. Jesus came as a human being, fully flesh and blood just

² Fred B. Craddock, *Interpretation Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Luke* (John Knox, 190), 289.

as we are flesh and blood. Think carefully with me here about what this means. This is critically important. In the incarnation – that’s what we call this reality of God taking on flesh – Christ took on humanity. In Christ, humanity was perfected. We see in his life the one example in history of a sinless human being living exactly the way God made humans to live, full of nothing but love. In Christ, humanity also went to the cross where Jesus, though sinless, took upon himself the penalty for all human sin. Finally, in Christ, humanity was led out of the grave and into resurrection and glory where death and decay are forever banished.

The New Testament writers talk a lot about how believers are “in Christ.” Colossians 2:9-10 says it as well as anywhere: **“For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and in Christ you have been brought to fullness. He is the head over every power and authority.”**³ In Christ we are brought to fullness. Christ took humanity with him all the way from Bethlehem to Calvary, and then on to glory in God’s Kingdom. In other words, the way for us is clear. Christ is the way. The invitation is that if we trust him, place our lives in his hands, we are *in him*. Crucified with and in him, our sin forgiven. Raised with and in him, we are redeemed. Perfected with and in him, we are made new and righteous forever. Not just life after death, but a whole new sort of life after death!⁴ And not just our souls, but one day our flesh and bone bodies as well. This is the hope of the resurrection! What we see here in Christ is offered to all who believe.

Is this difficult to wrap your brain around? It is, right! And it’s difficult to understand because, at least on a rational level, it’s *impossible* to understand. Faith is absolutely necessary here. Reason cannot suffice. The 15th century German theologian Thomas À Kempis put it this way in his classic work *The Imitation of Christ*:

Many have lost their devotion by attempting to pry into matters too high for them. It is faith and a holy life that are required of you, not a lofty intellect or knowledge of the profound mysteries of God...Therefore, submit yourself to God, and humble your reason to faith, and the light of knowledge shall be granted you in so far as it is be profitable and necessary.⁵

³ NIV

⁴ II Corinthians 5:17 declares, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” (NIV)

⁵ Thomas À Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, (Barnes & Nobel Books, 1952), 216. Kempis is referring in this section to the mystery of the Lord’s Supper, but I think his point can be fairly applied to Christian doctrine in general.

What a relief, right? We don’t have to understand all this. This is not to discount reason, of course, which is a gift God gave us to use to seek as much understanding as we can possibly gain. But reason will not take us all the way. These mysteries are too great to fully capture in our minds. But though we may not fully understand, that is no reason to let doubts arise in our hearts. Believe the eye-witness testimony, that these men and women literally touched the hands and feet of the risen Christ that Sunday evening. Believe that in the reality of the resurrection, everything changed. It is the fulcrum upon which history turns. Everything before led up the moment of the cross and the empty tomb.⁶ Everything afterwards flows from it. Jesus raised in body to a new creation is the first fruit of what God intends to do with all of creation, humanity at the center, on earth as it is in heaven.

But how is this relevant to us? That’s the natural question to ask here. Is our job now to just wait around until all these things come to pass? No. And here is something we *can* fully understand because Jesus is crystal clear. What he says here to these first disciples he says to all disciples, including those of us here who are seeking to follow him: **“[This good news] is to be proclaimed in [my] name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem [and across the world to Sacramento]. You are witnesses of these things.”**

We hear the word ‘witness’ and we think of somebody in court giving testimony about a crime they saw committed. Let me reframe it here. You can also bear witness to good news. Simple example. If I discover a taco truck that makes, without a doubt, the best street tacos in all of Sacramento (which I have, by the way), the possibility now exists for me to bear witness to that good news. I say ‘possibility’ because I don’t have to tell anybody. I can keep it to myself. But if there is any love in me, any kindness and generosity, I can’t help but tell others, especially others also fond of Mexican food, where they can go and experience a little bit of carnitas heaven. So when I tell you that the best street tacos in the city can be found at the taco truck parked in the parking lot at 44th and Fruitridge I am bearing witness to very good news. You’re welcome.

Now, don’t spend the rest of the sermon thinking about Mexican food. That’s not the point. Don’t miss the point! If you are a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ, he is now sending you out into the world to use your life, your actions and your words, to bear witness to other people the good news that Jesus has made a way for all people, along with all creation, to be set free and made new, to find a life that is free of death and decay

⁶ See how Peter brilliantly fleshes this out in Acts 2:14-36.

forever! As others have put it, we are called to be Jesus' representatives in this world. As we are in Christ and as Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, is in us, we are sent to bear witness to the coming of this new reality, which he called the Kingdom of God.

Many of you know that Luke wrote a sequel to his Gospel. It's called the Book of Acts, and it's the story of these first disciples after the resurrection. If you've never read it, read it sometime. It's not dull. In fact, it reads a lot like the gospel. Powerful teaching. Unbelievable miracles. Lives absolutely transformed, often the lives of the sorts of people you would least expect to be transformed. The only difference is that in Acts it's not Jesus walking around doing these things but his followers. Through them, the Kingdom of God, this new and coming reality of heaven coming to earth which exploded at Easter, through them this new reality is coming to pass one human life at a time.

The Book of Acts is only 28 chapters long, however. It only covers a short period of human history. And it does not end with resolution. It's like one of those movies that leaves you hanging, knowing that at least one sequel is coming. It won't end, in fact, until Christ returns. It's still being written, now in places far beyond Jerusalem and Rome, in places as far away as Sacramento and Elk Grove. And we are woefully out of touch if we imagine that the current chapters of this story aren't as powerful and transformative as the ones Luke first recorded.

One of the things I got to do this summer on sabbatical in Africa was to spend time with an Ethiopian pastor named Mamusha Fenta. Many of you met him and his wife, Leke, when they were here in August. Mamusha, as some of you know, is a part of a ministry in Ethiopia that is coming alongside churches in that part of the world to carry out the very mission Jesus gives disciples here, bearing witness to the good news of the gospel. I don't have time to go into great detail here, but I do want to tell you I have been forever changed by the stories I heard and the people I met in that part of the world. As I've told some of you already, the book of Acts is continuing to be written in East Africa today.

Christ is meeting people there in miraculous ways – in healings, in dreams and visions, in even physical manifestations. Simple and often barely educated people are being sent out into regions where the threat of physical persecution is a reality and they are, with great selfless love, bearing witness to Christ to people who do not know him, much less his love and grace. Many people who are trapped in dead and dark religions which teach them that they must earn their own salvation by their own goodness and effort, are

hearing the witness of the gospel of grace and coming to Christ in numbers I could not fathom. Many of these people are religious leaders in a context where becoming a Christian leads to persecution, isolation, loss of family, and even death. They are coming to faith anyway. Hundreds, if not thousands, of house churches are being planted in communities where before no church existed. When you hear Mamusha and others tell the stories, all you can say is that these are the sorts of things that only God could do. That he would use ordinary people to accomplish such things, it's beyond understanding.

Brothers and sisters, this is the life Christ is calling us to as well. We are to be his witnesses to these things right here where God has us. We live in a beautiful city full of many wonderful people. I love this city. But we are also surrounded in our city by brokenness, and hopelessness, and addiction, and torn relationships and families, and false religious teachings everywhere, and anxious people, and racial division, heartbreaking poverty, unspeakable violence, great loneliness, and at the end of the day very, very little true peace, at least the peace that Jesus declares is now available through him.

And do you know Jesus' prayer for Sacramento? In Sacramento as it is in heaven. And that's not just Jesus' prayer, but the prayer he is teaching us to pray, and not only to pray but to give ourselves to seeing fulfilled. If you are a follower of Jesus this is *the central calling of your life*, the mission around which every other aspect of your life is to be ordered. If we are a community of followers of Jesus, then this is *the central calling of our congregation*, the mission around which every other activity in this church must be ordered. We are not blessed to simply be blessed. We are blessed to be a blessing. We were loved to be sent out in love. We are shown grace to extend it to others. We have been made witnesses to go and bear witness.

Is this too difficult a calling to fulfill on our own? Absolutely! It's why Jesus tells the disciples here to wait in Jerusalem until, in his words, they have been **“clothed with power from on high.”** If you are a Christian, if you truly have trusted Jesus as your Lord and as your Savior, then you are *in Christ*. The power that raised him bodily from the dead lives, by the presence of the Holy Spirit, in you as it lives in all Christians. We never go out alone. Christ goes before us and after us, empowering us to increasingly live as he would live if he were in our shoes. The heavy lifting is *his* job. Our job is simply to bear witness to people around us who are absolutely lost and, though they don't know it, also absolutely loved.

I love the account in Acts 4 when Peter and John are dragged before the Jewish religious leaders in Jerusalem after they healed a crippled beggar at the temple gates. When asked to explain themselves, they simply bear witness. By the power of the Spirit of Christ within them they simply, but boldly, declare what it is that Jesus has done and is doing. And when they are finished Luke writes that, **“when [the religious leaders] saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus.”**⁷

These are only fisherman. He’s only an insurance salesman. She’s works at Walmart. That kid’s in my Biology class, and I think he’s actually flunking. He’s just a regular guy I play softball with. She’s the coach of my kid’s rec soccer team. In many ways, aren’t all of us here uneducated and ordinary men and women? We know a few things, yes, but there is far more we don’t know and even much of what we believe we don’t totally understand. And yet, could it not also be said of us in our day, that if we are in Christ and go out as his witnesses in love, boldness and humility, that others might be similarly amazed to recognize that we, too, are companions of Jesus, the one who brings life because he is life.

I want you to ask you to do something. Let me give you a simple practice to incorporate into your life this week and maybe beyond. Every morning this week – doesn’t have to be the very first thing you do after you open your eyes, but at least early on before the rush of the day is upon you – take a moment, along with whatever time in scripture or prayer you already set aside, take moment to be still before God and to remember that Jesus of Nazareth, the one who died on the cross, *actually did rise flesh and bone from the dead*. Not to die again someday, but to a resurrected life that is forever beyond death and decay. And he’s still resurrected! This was not just one isolated event in history, but the lighting of fuse that will lead to the restoration of all things and all people who receive in faith this reality. If it helps, take time each morning this week pray this simple prayer, or one like it:

Lord Jesus, you are alive. I don’t understand it but I believe it in faith. Help me have faith. You are with me today. I am in you and you are in me. Today I am sent out, wherever I am going, to bear witness to this reality. Empower me to do so. I look forward to seeing how you will answer, even today, our prayer...in Sacramento as it is in heaven.

Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read through Luke 24:36-49 again. Pay particular attention to things in the text that stand out to you.
2. The first words out of Jesus’ mouth when he appears to the disciples are, “Peace be with you.” Why these words? What would they have meant to you had you been one of the disciples there that day?
3. Why does it matter (or does it?) that Jesus was resurrected in a *physical* body and not just spiritually?
4. In verse 45 we read that Jesus “opened their minds to understand the scriptures.” Do disciples always need Jesus to do this for them?
5. Jesus calls his disciples here to be “witnesses” of these things to the world. What does that mean?
6. Are you personally living as a witness to these things in Sacramento these days? How about our congregation? How so? How might you/we?
7. What specific thing is Jesus saying to you through this text and this message?
8. How are you going to think or live differently because of what Christ has said to you here? Be specific.

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

Why did Jesus want to make sure that the disciples knew he wasn’t a ghost, that it was really him in his body?

⁷ Acts 4:13.