



Central Peninsula Church

Catalog No.
1286-75
Luke 24:36-53
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August 20, 2006

Worshippers and Witnesses

SERIES: *A Savior for All People*

One of the most amazing miracles recorded in the Bible isn't always viewed as a miracle. I'm talking about how the disciples of Jesus changed almost overnight. It's like they "morphed" from depressed, doubting and cowardly men into joyful, courageous men of faith. After Jesus was crucified, you might say they went into the tank. They were done. Most of them didn't even have the gumption to visit his tomb until after they heard it was empty. When they heard that perhaps he had risen, they considered it utter nonsense.

But then you go from the gospels to the book of Acts. Acts picks up where Luke leaves off. It's volume two of the same story. But somehow the men on the pages of the book of Acts are totally different than the ones at the end of Luke. The two things that stand out to me about them is worship and witness. Somehow these self-consumed men became worshippers. They escaped from their naval gazing depression and got caught up in the glory and goodness of God. Not only that, these fearful men became powerful witnesses. The same Peter who had denied Christ before a slave girl now proclaimed him before the Sanhedrin. Don't get me wrong, they still weren't perfect. They were still a work in progress. But they were different. Why? What changed these men?

I believe that's one of the most important questions we can ask today. We wonder why sometimes we and our churches resemble more the men we see in the gospels than the ones we see in Acts. Just take these two things: worship and witness. These are reliable signs of spiritual life. Like a pulse, without them you call a mortician. Worship is that joyful response to the glorious being we call God and the gracious rescue work he has done through Christ. Witness is the impulse to tell others about what that same God has done in your life. When we eat at an amazing restaurant or see an incredible movie, what do we want to do? We want to tell others about it. No one has to force us or train us; it just comes naturally. It's the same thing with telling others about Jesus. It just oozes out of us.

But if we're honest, our lives and our churches are often characterized by placid worship and reluctant witness. We're self consumed, discouraged, preoccupied with the trivial. We're often more impressed by new car models or a great golf shot than by the glory of God. When it comes to witness, we're afraid of hurting other people's feelings; terrified that maybe we'll say something wrong. And so we just try to be nice or hope

that someone notices that we go to church.

I believe it all boils down to one thing: Do we really believe he is alive and not just alive out there but alive and here with us today? If we believe that, everything changes. And most of us here believe that. Most of would get that one right on a pop quiz—he is alive; he is with us today. But I wonder if we really know what that means? How do we let that turn us into both worshippers and witnesses?

In Luke 24 Jesus appears to his disciples one last time. And in Luke's gospel it is this last encounter with Christ that made all the difference in the world for the disciples because it was in this encounter that they come to grips with the fact that Jesus really is alive and with them. Why did that change them? There are four things I want you to see.

I. He is alive in the real world.

First of all, they realized that he was alive in the real world in which they lived. Look at vv.36-43.

"While they were telling these things, He Himself stood in their midst and said to them, 'Peace be to you.' But they were startled and frightened and thought that they were seeing a spirit. And He said to them, 'Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? See My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself; touch Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.' And when He had said this, He showed them His hands and His feet. While they still could not believe it because of their joy and amazement, He said to them, 'Have you anything here to eat?' They gave Him a piece of a broiled fish; and He took it and ate it before them."

It's clear that even after they heard about his appearance to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus and to Simon they still didn't really believe it. So when Jesus shows up in the room they're scared stiff! They thought they were seeing a spirit or a ghost. So Jesus makes every effort to prove to them that he's not a ghost but he's a body. That's why his tomb was empty—his body was raised up. He shows them his hands and his feet. He invites them to touch him and feel that he's real. And when they're suspended in that "it's too good to be true" state of mind, he asks them for something to eat. They happen to have a piece of broiled cod right there and

they give it to him and he eats it. I don't think he did that because he was hungry. He did all of this to prove to them that it was HIM, not a spirit, not a ghost, but the same HIM they had known for the last three years.

Have you ever wondered why that is so important? Why did that change them? Why couldn't he have been a spirit? By the way, that's what most other religions teach. They teach that the afterlife is a spirit life. Either we're individual spirits or kind of all melted into one big collective spirit. But the Judeo-Christian tradition has always been different. We believe that our bodies will be raised up. They'll be the same but they'll also be different. They'll be our bodies, but they'll also be as different as a grain of wheat is from the stalk that eventually grows out of it. But, I ask again, why is that so important? I mean, some of us don't want the same bodies for eternity!

But this is life changing because it tells us that Jesus is alive today in the real world. He's not a flesh denying God; he's a flesh affirming God. He doesn't teach us to escape the real world because it's bad; he teaches us to engage in the real world; to be in it, but not of it. That's why followers of Christ care about things like feeding the hungry and taking care of the environment. Creation is good, not bad. Yes, it's fallen, but when God made the real world, he then entered the real world in the person of his Son, and we see here that in some way even the afterlife will embrace creation. That's why we talk about a new heaven and a new earth. I believe that changed these disciples and it should change us. It turned them into men and women who believed that making a difference in the real world mattered. True religion isn't about escaping into Nirvana, but like James said later on, it's about **"visiting orphans and widows in their distress"** (James 1:27).

II. He is alive in the Scripture.

The second thing I want you to see is that they realized that he's alive in the Scriptures. Look at vv.44-47.

"Now He said to them, 'These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.' Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and He said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.'"

Remember that this was a theme in his discussion with the two on the road to Emmaus, which

had just taken place. Remember how their hearts burned as he explained the Scriptures to them? Well, here Jesus opens their minds to understand the Scriptures. Specifically, he gave them the ability to see HIM in the Scriptures. He says "all the things which are written about me." What things? He says, "that the Christ would suffer and rise..." But that's not all. It was also written that "repentance and forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in his name to all the nations..." For example, consider Isaiah 49:6 where the Lord says, **"I will also make you a light of the nations so that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."** Paul and Barnabas quote that verse in the book of Acts to explain why they're taking the gospel to the gentiles (Acts 13:37-38).

When the disciples began to see Christ in the Scriptures it changed their lives. That's one of the things that transformed them. It's like they had been in a dark room, feeling themselves around, but all of a sudden Jesus turned the lights on and they could see. It's like they had been trying to put a puzzle together without any picture of what it would look like when it was finished, and here Jesus gives them the lid to the box and they could see the bigger picture.

I believe Jesus does the same thing for us that he did with the disciples. He opens our minds to understand the Scripture. That doesn't mean that we don't have to study. Nor does it mean that we'll automatically understand every detail we read in the Bible. It simply means that we're given the ability to see how the Scriptures as a whole point to one great story of redemption through Jesus Christ.

I heard a story about the Nazca Indians who live in the plains of Peru. For years people noticed how they would make these strange lines in the plains which covered many square miles. Everyone just assumed that these were ancient irrigation ditches. Then in 1939 a professor discovered that their true meaning could only be seen from the air. When he viewed these lines from an airplane, it was clear that these seemingly random lines formed huge drawings of birds, insects and animals. In the same way, people often think the Bible is a series of individual, unconnected stories. But when God opens our mind, we see the Scriptures as a whole; we see that a divine story line weaves through all the diverse strands of the Bible, and at the center of that is Jesus Christ and his work of rescuing fallen human beings from sin and death. When you realize he's alive in the Scriptures, that changes your life.

III. He is alive in our witness.

The third thing they realized is that he would be alive in their witness. Notice what he says in vv.48-49. **"You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending forth the promise of My Father upon you; but you are to stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high."** Now we know that the apostles were in one

sense unique witnesses. They witnessed things that we don't get to witness and then they wrote about it in what we call the New Testament. In that sense they're unique. But we know that you and I are also called to be witnesses. In the first chapter of Acts, Jesus said, "**You shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth**" (Acts 1:8). That's a call to all of us.

Sometimes we have a hard time with this. We're afraid of being rejected or labeled. Sometimes we're afraid of being identified with Christians who are hypocritical or mean or narrow. Or maybe we're afraid of not knowing enough. What if someone asks me a question I can't answer? What if I lead someone astray by saying the wrong thing?

But I want you to notice that Jesus anticipated these fears. He does two things in these verses that will help us in this call to witness. First of all, he makes a promise to send us someone who will empower us. He talks about the "promise of my Father." He says we'll be "clothed with power from on high." And they were to stay in Jerusalem until they received this gift. That's talking about the Holy Spirit. You see, in a sense, Jesus didn't trust these men. So he says, "Don't do anything, don't go anywhere, don't say a word, until the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And then, and only then, you can be my witnesses." And for the believer in Jesus Christ, this is a promise that has already been fulfilled. Listen to Ephesians 1:13, "**In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation — having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise...**" So when you believe the gospel, you're sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise. You can still quench the Spirit. You can still grieve the Spirit. You can still choose not to walk in the Spirit, but you cannot lose the Spirit. And that's what Jesus is talking about here.

It's like a little a first grader who is constantly being beaten up by a much bigger sixth grade bully. He's petrified to even show up on the playground. But then he remembers that he has an older brother in eighth grade who is even bigger than the bully, and so he asks him to come to the playground and deal with the bully. Now he heads out for recess without a care in the world because he has a powerful helper.

That's what we have! Jesus knew that the world would be a scary place to be a witness for him because they would treat us the same way they treated him. But he has sent us a more powerful helper and so we go out into the world without fear.

But there is something else here that Jesus says to help us in our witness. It actually came back in v.47. We worry about what to say. We worry about getting it wrong. Jesus gives us here the gospel in capsule form. He gives the ABC's of what our message is to be:

A. *Repentance*—that means that to come to Christ

you have to have a change of mind. You have to realize the need to turn around and go in a different direction. In a sense, we all start out as idol worshippers. We worship cars and boats, power and success, beauty and fame, and ultimately we worship ourselves. So, we have to admit that and turn from that towards the true God. That's part of our message.

B. *Forgiveness of sins*—this is possible because Jesus died for our sins; he took our punishment upon himself. As a result, "there is no condemnation" for those who put their trust in him. That's why he says that this would be proclaimed "in his name." Did you see that? Forgiveness is not something God hands out just because he's nice or tolerant. Forgiveness is something he grants because of what Jesus has accomplished on the cross.

C. *To all nations*—this seems like a no brainer to us, but to the Jews it was radical. It took the first ten chapters of the book of Acts for the early Christians to get this. This message of forgiveness is for everyone. Our world is increasingly divided between the west and the east, and it seems the lines are often drawn between Muslims and Christians. Regardless of what we think about the war in Iraq, one of the sad consequences is that it deepens the animosity Muslims have towards Christians. But Jesus tells us here this message is not just for the west but for the east, and we have to find ways to cross that bridge. Closer to home, "to all nations," for you it might mean reaching out to an annoying neighbor or an estranged relative or silent coworker.

IV. He is alive in heaven.

So he's alive in the real world, he's alive in the Scriptures and he's alive in our witness. The last thing Jesus wanted them to realize is that he's alive in heaven. That may seem obvious to you, but look what happened in vv.50–53.

"And He led them out as far as Bethany, and He lifted up His hands and blessed them. While He was blessing them, He parted from them and was carried up into heaven. And they, after worshiping Him, returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple praising God."

One of the things we need to realize here is that Luke has now skipped ahead to something that happened 40 days later. The event that takes place here is what believers have always called the Ascension of Christ. We know from Acts 1:3 that Jesus made physical appearances for 40 days after his resurrection, and then he ascended into heaven, after which those physical appearances ceased.

Here we see that after 40 days he takes them out to Bethany, which is on the Mt. of Olives near

Jerusalem. He lifts up his hands and begins to bless them. As he's doing that, he's lifted up to heaven. Now that all sounds very wonderful but what does it really mean and why is it so important that it would even be included in the Apostles Creed?

One of the things that's important to see from the standpoint of Luke's gospel is that this is the end, and Luke ends his gospel similarly to how he started it. Remember how Zechariah the priest and the father of John the Baptist was rendered speechless in the temple on the Day of Atonement? Normally, he would come out of the temple and bless the people as the priest, but he was unable to do it. That's how this gospel started, with no blessing from a mute priest! But here we see it ends with Jesus pronouncing the priestly blessing on his disciples as he ascends into heaven.

Why is his ascension so life changing? Because it shows us that he is our high priest who, after making atonement, entered into the holy of holies in heaven. It means that he has been exalted to be seated at the right hand of God. That's what the passage that was read earlier said: **"When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high"** (Heb.1:3). "Right hand" is a metaphor for all power. So the ascension of Jesus reveals that "God has exalted him to the highest place and given him the name that is above every name" (Phil. 2:9-10).

But that's not all. His work has not ended. Heb. 7:23-25 says that since he **"holds His priesthood permanently...He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them."** So he's alive in heaven and his work of salvation continues as he intercedes for us. I don't think this means he's up there continually begging God to save us, but rather his very presence in heaven, as the one who died for the human race and rose again, now seated at God's right hand, is itself an intercession that saves all those who draw near to him. So the ascension reveals both his exaltation and his continued intercession. He's alive in heaven!

And the disciples understood what this all meant because look how they responded: First, they worshipped him. Don't miss that. It doesn't say they worshipped God, but him! He is God! Notice they didn't even wait for a worship band. They didn't wait until Sunday. They worshipped him right there. But that's not all. The second thing they did was joyfully go to Jerusalem and wait, and while they waited they praised God in the temple. They were waiting for the promised Holy Spirit because then they could not

only worship, but they could witness.

CONCLUSION

Jesus has laid the groundwork for us to become joyful worshippers and powerful witnesses. He is alive and he is with us.

He is alive and with us in the real world. He is not a ghost.

He is alive and with us in the Scriptures. He's opened our minds to see him and his work from Genesis to Revelation.

He is alive in our witness because he sends his Spirit to live in us and empower our witness.

He is alive in heaven as our exalted High Priest who lives to make intercession for us.

He is alive. He is with us. That changes everything!

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