

Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd
Easter 7 (Ascension Text)
June 2, 2019

A Mystery to Ponder Luke 24:44-53

This closing paragraph in the Gospel of Luke takes us to the threshold of mystery and leads us into an entirely new day. We are faced here with the *close* of the first part of Luke's story — the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ, the story of Christ's ministry on earth. This is the finish of that story, and the beginning of the story of the church. We begin by dealing with three lightning rods of our faith: the scriptures, the Messiah and proclamation.

The key to this passage lies in verse 45. Here Jesus stands among his most faithful followers during his ministry on earth. His resurrection is now a sudden, wonderfully plain reality for them. And only *then* does he open their minds truly to understand what he has been teaching them, almost from the beginning: that the Messiah must suffer, and be handed over into the hands of sinners, who will kill him and then after three days he will rise again. It is only at the very end of this part of the story — what amounts to the first part of the story — that the disciples can begin to *understand*. And they can understand only because, as verse 45 tells us, the risen Christ "... opened their minds to understand the scriptures." What is it that he opens *their* minds to understand? And what is it that Jesus Christ — when we give our minds, our hearts, our lives to him — opens *our* minds to understand?

That the scriptures, properly understood, say that the Messiah must suffer and rise from the dead on the third day. It is only right at the very end — which is really the very beginning — that Jesus opens the minds of his closest followers to understand the scriptures. They had to go through, with him, all that they have gone through to this closing/beginning juncture before the time was right for them to be introduced to the proper understanding of the scriptures. The journey of faith does not *begin* with proper understanding of the scriptures. The journey of Christian faith begins with following Jesus, who opens our minds to understand.

What is it that Jesus opens our minds to understand? That the testimony of the scriptures is that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in the name of the Messiah to *all* nations, *beginning* in Jerusalem. Those first followers of Jesus have had their minds opened by the risen Christ. We need to have ours opened, too. We, like those earliest disciples, are standing on the threshold of the most ultimate of mysteries. We are faced here, not with “the historical Jesus,” but with the *post-resurrection* Jesus, the Jesus who stands outside of history, the *risen* Christ. Let us let *him* open our minds to understand!

The Messiah, the risen Christ, *Jesus*, did not come to call his followers to form a perfect little community for themselves in Jerusalem ... or anywhere. This *Ascension* that we remember today is not a triumphant ending to a great story of salvation.

The Ascension is the beginning — a humble beginning, not a triumphant victory. The disciples are not to receive the Holy Spirit, and then turn inward upon themselves and form a perfect society that shines like a beacon to the rest of the benighted world. We are often led to believe something along these lines, but we're seeing here that this is not the case. No, the disciples are to go *out*, into Jerusalem — not just to the temple, though they will begin there, but into *all* of Jerusalem, its highways and byways, its alleys and apartments.

And then they are to go out from Jerusalem and into all the world. And do what? Build schools and hospitals? No. Build community centers? No. Build *churches*? No, not that either. They are not, first and foremost, to take on any such commendable projects, though they *will*, as it turns out, do all of them. But these commendable projects, as right and good as they are, are not their “prime directive,” to borrow a locution from a more modern “religion.”

What the disciples are to do before anything and everything else — starting in Jerusalem and moving out into all the world — is to *proclaim*. Proclaim *what*? The Bible? No. True religion? No.

Flawlessly reasoned theology? No. The Ten Commandments? No. A rigorous and uncompromisingly correct moral code? No.

All of this, and more, will come out of the disciples' proclamation — indeed, sometimes the proclamation will get *lost*, buried under all the religiosity and theology, lawn signs blaring the Ten Commandments to any who care to look and any who *don't* care to look, and the strident moral demands and directives. But this is not, first and foremost, what the disciples are to be about. The disciples are to *proclaim*, to be sure, simply to *proclaim*. But what is it that they are to proclaim? *This* for a start ...

That the Bible, the scriptures, properly understood, point to Jesus as the Messiah. And the Messiah is not some superhuman, angelic figure, untouched and untouchable, immune to human suffering and un-swayed by death. No, God's Messiah — the God-sent Savior, the Son of Man, the Son of God, *God's* Man, the crowning representative of all humanity, men and women together —*will* suffer, just as all women and men suffer. The Messiah will die, just as we die; he will suffer and die a horrible death, abandoned by his own, abandoned by God. The Messiah will suffer as badly as any human will ever suffer. After suffering death, after dying just as we die, and after spending three days in a tomb, the Messiah will rise, beyond and above death. The Messiah will conquer death itself by suffering and passing through death.

But this, even this, as miraculous as it sounds, and *is*, is only part of what the disciples are to proclaim. This, as incredible, as miraculous as it is, is really only the *motivation* for the proclamation.

What the disciples are to *proclaim*, starting in Jerusalem, and moving out into all the nations, is *repentance and forgiveness of sins*, in the name of God's representative, the Messiah, the Son of God and the Son of Man.

The disciples are to proclaim that God — as another gospel says — did not send God's Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved. God's Son, God's special envoy and representative has come into the world to tell the world that God does not come to judge. God is *coming* — but not to stand us up before an inexorable bar of divine justice and hold us resolutely accountable for every, last one of our sins. God does not want to punish us for our mistakes, our self-centered arrogance, our misplaced values. The disciples are to proclaim, in the name of God's Messiah, in the name of the Human One who was absolutely one with God, that God forgives.

What the disciples are to proclaim is repentance, *metanoia*, turning around, turning back. What the disciples are to proclaim is a *new day, every day*. *Repent*; turn from the way that leads to nowhere and follow the way of the Messiah, the Son of God, the Son of Man, God's Man. God does not hold our past against us. With God, the past is forgiven. The past is the past. We need not wallow in guilt. Repent, *turn*. Turn around and step forward into a new day, a new life with God.

The Ascension is a rising from death, being pulled out of the grasp of death, being yanked free of the power of death. For Christians, this *Ascension* that we celebrate today is the proverbial bottom line. It is as radical a claim as there can be. If we submit to the One who ascended, we submit to as radical a claim upon ourselves as there can be. When we submit ourselves, our lives, to this risen Christ and commit ourselves to walking in his way, nothing will ever be the same. He will open our minds to understand scripture in a new way, a way that proclaims him to be the point and substance of faith and life. He will send us forth to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins in our hometowns and perhaps in the entire world. He will call us, he will equip us, to do all this, starting in *this*, our “Jerusalem,” and moving out into the entire world.

Where are you, in regard to this *Ascension* of the risen Christ? Who is Jesus, to you? Is he simply a prophet, giving instructions from God as to how-to-do-good things? Is he simply an enigmatic religious figure, giving you a program for living a “successful life”? Or is he the risen Christ, the Messiah who has brought you to the mountaintop, showing you a Promised Land that lies beyond death? Has he brought you to respectability and a new religion — or has he brought you to the threshold of mystery and a new life?