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The Third Sunday after Pentecost

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Believers Share the Love of Christ with the World

When Jesus ascended into heaven, he commissioned his followers to proclaim the good news wherever they went. He strengthened their faith and fortified their courage with the promises of his Word. Jesus shares his promises with us, too, and calls us to be his witnesses in our own way and our own place.

Sermon

Luke 24:44-53

Christ Has Ascended! Now What?

[Jesus] said to them, "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."

Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

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. Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.

The big day is finally here! You've wrapped the presents and put up the tree. Your home is filled with the voices of friends and family and the smells of Christmas dinner. A day long anticipated and full of celebration and excitement! Then the next morning... What now? How could this normal day compare?

In the sermon text for today, 40 days have passed since Jesus' joyous resurrection, and so many things have happened in that time. The women had gone to the tomb and found no body of Jesus! Jesus had appeared to Mary Magdalene in the garden and appeared to the disciples in the upper room as they cowered in fear! The disciples on the road to Emmaus got to travel with him as he explained the scriptures to them over the course of a few hours. They had thought their Lord had been taken from them! That their hope was gone! But... He had risen! And he appeared to them bodily – letting them touch the wounds in his hands, feet, and side, and eating with them. And even when he showed them the physical proof of his resurrection, the disciples were still a bit confused and doubtful... So, Jesus opened the scriptures to them and explained how he had come just as the Old Testament foretold – completing all that was promised. It's the next part that may confuse us. Having risen from the dead and taken the time to prove his victory and instruct his disciples ... He left! He ascended into heaven! – leaving his disciples awestruck and alone. They, like us, were left thinking – **Christ Has Ascended!** –

Now What? But Jesus had prepared them, and he has prepared us too: **Christ Has Ascended - so take comfort in His fulfillment, and spread the news of His forgiveness.**

Before Jesus' ascension, we know that he spent 40 days appearing to his disciples and demonstrating the reality of his resurrection. In doing so, Jesus wanted to unite the puzzle pieces of scripture in the minds of his disciples. To clear up any confusion or doubt they have He points them back to the Old Testament, we hear...

⁴⁴ *He (Jesus) said to them, "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."*

⁴⁵ *Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.* ⁴⁶ *He told them, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day."*

Our resurrected Savior refers back to scripture and reminds his disciples that everything that happened – Had to happen! This is not new information. He had told them again and again that the Messiah must die and then would rise again. This was foretold throughout the Old Testament and specifically in the Psalms and Isaiah. God's promises must come true, and he had promised that he would send his chosen one to complete the law perfectly, pay the ultimate price for sin and rise from the dead as final proof of his perfect payment. Jesus had done that just as was promised. Jesus opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. No doubt they were still confused. No doubt they had trouble comprehending the incredible events they had witnessed over the last few days. No doubt some of them had false notions about what Jesus had come to do. No doubt they thought that He had come to have an earthly kingdom in Jerusalem – and his crucifixion was a revolting and shameful end to his fame – this isn't what a Savior should look like!

What about you? Do you struggle with the facts of these incredible, seemingly impossible events? We all know that once you die there's no coming back... It's a scientific fact! Do you have your own ideas about who Jesus was and what he came to do? He was a great moral teacher and political figure, right? Certainly, he's a role model for someone who wants to be a good person, right? ... Does the reality of Jesus meet our expectations? Or does our sinful nature twist and distort our expectations to be based on earthly glory and not the Savior that God knows we need. When we fail to understand the consistent message of Scripture it can lead to worry and fear. Let God's word speak to your doubt. Jesus appeared physically, bodily to hundreds of people after his resurrection. The accounts of which have been written down and preserved for us! Let Jesus tell you who he is and why he came – He makes sure there is no mistaking it! He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the whole world – The Christ, the Son of God! – **Take comfort in his fulfillment.**

And because Christ carefully lays out how he graciously fulfilled all that had to be done - culminating in his death and resurrection - he sets the scene for his Ascension.

⁵⁰ *When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them.* ⁵¹ *While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven."*

Jesus' ascension must have seemed sudden to the disciples. Jesus the teacher, leader, and Savior up and leaves! But this is not abandonment, it's God's sign of approval and final fulfillment. This too Jesus had told his disciples about beforehand (found in John 14). Jesus was sent out by the Father to this earth, completed his work of atonement for our salvation, and the Father received him back with open arms when his work was complete. Yet another beautiful sign of Jesus' completed work on our behalf! And at first glance to us, it can seem like abandonment as well. He's left us all alone! Our continued doubts about Jesus and the proof of his payment for sin are resolved when we see what is said in Scripture. Christ has fulfilled all of the prophecies about him and has taken his place sitting at the right hand of the Father, just as he said he would. For this reason, the Ascension is a big day in its own right. We think of Christmas and Easter as big days, but together with Christ's birth and resurrection we can add his Ascension. Why? Because it shows he fulfilled all things, and the mission

of salvation is complete! There is no uncertainty with Jesus - Dear friends, **Take comfort in the fulfillment that Christ's ascension brings!**

So, Christ has ascended! Now what? Not only do we take comfort in the certainty of his fulfillment, but we embrace the opportunity **to be his witnesses and spread the news of his forgiveness!**

This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, The Messiah suffer? Done! Rise on the third day? Done! – What's next? ⁴⁷ *and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.* ⁴⁸ *You are witnesses of these things.* ⁴⁹ *I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."*

Jesus is saying, I have completed everything I set out to do, and you have seen it all! Now the message of Law and Gospel will be preached beginning at the capital city of Judea. But who would fulfill that? Who better than the disciples? They had seen the master teacher in action for the last three years, they had seen his mighty acts, and the completion of his saving work! Who better than they? What a blessed role they got to play in God's plan! And again, Jesus does not leave them alone, He sends them the Holy Spirit to be with them at Pentecost - the comforter and guide to stay with them as they went out to all nations to preach the news about Jesus. They were prepared by the master teacher, and they had the Spirit of God with them always. They could be his witnesses!

So now that the disciples knew the game plan, how did they put it into action? After recording this conversation between Jesus and his disciples at some point after his resurrection, Luke now jumps to the day of Christ's Ascension...

⁵⁰ *When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them.* ⁵¹ *While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven.* ⁵² *Then they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.* ⁵³ *And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.*

As Jesus is taken into heaven, what would you imagine the disciples' reaction to be? Fear? Sadness? Uncertainty? Anger - we thought we had him back and now he's gone again? ... But no, it's joy! Why? They have proof that Scripture is fulfilled and are on fire with a message to be shared!

The comfort the disciples must have felt that day! Jesus ascends into heaven before their eyes, blessing them as he goes. The disciples respond with hearts of faith and joy. They worship him on the spot and then head back to Jerusalem just as he told them to. And they're filled with great joy! They are not sad and downcast as they return to Jerusalem, as if they've been abandoned. They are on fire for the Gospel and rejoicing in what they have seen. They begin their task of spreading the news of forgiveness in the temple – praising God continually.

So, Christ has ascended. Now what? How would the disciples have answered that question? I think they would confidently remind us to take comfort in Christ's fulfillment. And they would certainly say, it's time to be his witnesses! How blessed we are that we get to play a similar role in God's plan of salvation! We too have been given the honor of spreading the good news of God's forgiveness through his Son. We have heard his words and seen his deeds on the pages of his Word. Do we consider it a blessing? Or is it an afterthought? Is it a job only for a pastor and other professionals? Or is it a privilege for all God's children? Praise God for the forgiveness he gives - for our hearts which are hesitant in sharing the Gospel. We are empowered through the Spirit to be lights in this dark world. We have the tools we need! God's word – chock full of his promises to us. His Holy Spirit, living within us and spurring us on to live lives of service. We get to tell the joyous truth that in Christ, our justification is a certified fact. Through his fulfillment there is no doubt that we are forgiven. May we, as the disciples, live lives of continuous praise in the joy of Jesus' completed work and **spread the good news of his forgiveness.**

So, Christ has ascended... Now what? The big day has passed, and our Lord is long ascended from this earth. What should we do now? Open the pages of his Word and you'll see exactly what he's prepared us for. Our wise and loving God has given us all we need to serve him and those around us in this life. We have a sure and certain knowledge of Christ our Savior and that he is the perfect fulfillment of God's saving plan. He has left us with encouragement and a role to play ... one that we do naturally by faith. **Take comfort in his fulfillment and spread the good news of his forgiveness.** Amen.

This sermon was preached by Seminarian Josiah Mittelstadt.