

“From Fear to Faith to Joy”

Luke 24:36-53

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This morning our attention is drawn to the final moments Jesus spent with his disciples before returning to his Heavenly Father after his crucifixion and resurrection. We commonly refer to this as the ascension of Jesus.

Only Luke gives us a description of this event, and he does so in two places. He concludes his gospel with this story and repeats it to begin the book of Acts. It appears Luke used the ascension of Jesus to close the period of Jesus' public ministry and open the period of the church's mission.

Why was it necessary for the disciples to witness the ascension of Jesus? What message accompanied it they needed to understand?

According to Luke's version of the ascension in Acts, Jesus periodically appeared to the disciples for a period of forty days after the resurrection. These visits were used to convince the disciples of Jesus' resurrection and to give them final instructions for the work they would continue to do in Christ's name.

This was why there was a strong emphasis in many of the post-resurrections appearances to Jesus eating with the disciples and showing them his hands and feet. The Jesus who appeared in their midst multiple times and places was not an imposter or a ghost. He was the same person that was crucified by the Romans and buried in a borrowed tomb.

At some point, however, these sightings had to come to an end so Jesus could return to the Father and send the Holy Spirit to live in their hearts. How would the disciples know that

time had arrived? How could they be certain the appearances of Jesus they had grown accustomed to for over a month would no longer occur?

Something dramatic had to happen that would eliminate any confusion and erase all doubts the disciples may have had about the end of Jesus' earthly ministry. They needed to witness the final departure of Jesus, and Jesus knew it.

On the fortieth day after the resurrection, Jesus led the disciples to a hillside in nearby Bethany. He raised his hands to bless them and in the midst of this blessing, Jesus ascended out of their sight, leaving no doubt in their minds his earthly ministry was over and the Holy Spirit would soon be coming to take his place.

Take note of the response of the disciples to Jesus' departure. Luke says they returned to Jerusalem with great joy and continued going to the Temple while waiting for Jesus to send the Holy Spirit to indwell each one of them.

I find this part of the story to be rather intriguing. The disciples' reaction to Jesus' departure in Bethany was radically different from his first departure brought on by the crucifixion.

What was the reaction of the disciples after Jesus was buried? They were gripped by grief, confusion and fear. It appeared to them something had gone terribly wrong, and it would only be a matter of time until they were also crucified.

Contrast these negative feelings with the disciples' reaction to Jesus' ascension just forty days later. After watching Jesus vanish out of sight and ascend to heaven, they returned to Jerusalem with great joy, anticipating good things to come.

Why the different response? What changed in the hearts and minds of the disciples?

I pondered this for some time last week and believe it to be this. Life for the disciples was changing, radically and rapidly, but they grew to believe, with God's help, they could accept the changes, meet the challenges and embrace the opportunities.

Is this a message you need to hear today? Perhaps you are experiencing significant changes in your life, and you are now traveling down unfamiliar roads.

Are you questioning whether you are up to the challenges you are facing? Are your self-esteem and confidence under attack? Where can you turn to find the strength, courage, confidence, wisdom and guidance you need?

What do you think the disciples would tell you? For starters, I believe they would say they understand how you feel.

There was a time when they wondered how they were going to manage their many challenges and new responsibilities. They knew what it is like to be gripped by the kind of grief and fear that robs people of their future.

In addition, I feel the disciples would tell you to draw close to God. They would be quick to remind you that your challenges and opportunities are bigger than you are, but they are not bigger than God is.

They would be right, wouldn't they? The God they trusted was faithful to provide what they needed.

You must remember, the reason Jesus ascended to the Father was to allow the Holy Spirit to descend upon the disciples. At all times and in all places, God as Spirit would be with them. Never would they be alone, even when they felt that way.

Furthermore, God would not just be with them to give them strength and courage, but God would also help them to see the difference they could make in the lives of those around them who were struggling with their own changes.

Despair has a way of sinking in when we long for things to return to the way they were instead of catching a glimpse of a future where, with God's help, we have the power to change life for the better. Don't let this happen to you. Ask God to show you where you are needed and move in that direction.

Broken hearts are healed and confusion is often cleared up when people reach out to others who are struggling. Every step on the path of service leads to confidence, courage and a new sense of purpose.

There is a movement in the way Luke writes this wonderful story I don't want you to miss. For Luke, the resurrection and ascension of Jesus was a movement from fear to faith to joy.

The crucifixion of Jesus led to an overwhelming fear the disciples had about their own future. Forty days later, that fear turned to joy when Jesus returned to heaven for the last time. Sure, they would miss him and at times long to recapture days gone by, but they would not linger there.

God had places for them to go and things for them to do that were too important for them to ignore or neglect due to a longing for the past. There were sermons to preach, lessons to teach, wounds to heal, and lives to touch. There were sins to forgive, disputes to settle, prisoners to set free, addicts to liberate, hungry to feed, grieving to comfort, bridges of reconciliation to build and words of encouragement to share.

It was time for them to move out of their comfort zones and follow the Spirit's lead. It was time for them to be faithful disciples who trusted God as much as Jesus did.

The more I pondered this passage last week, the more I concluded Jesus told the disciples two things before he departed for the last time. I'll be ok and so will you. I'll be with God interceding on your behalf, and God will be with you.

This kind of faith turns fear to joy. Give it a try.