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Luke 24:44-53

Jesus is gone, let's celebrate!"

He 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." 45Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. 46He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, 47and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. 48You are witnesses of these things. 49I 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." 50When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. 51While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. 52Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. 53And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.

My great grandfather was a pastor. When my dad was a boy he spent the summer with my great-grandfather and great-grandmother. Every morning my great-grandfather would sit under a tree and read the Bible. Knowing that my great-grandfather had read through the Bible many times, my dad asked why he kept reading it. My great-grandfather said, "Every time I read it, I find something new that I had never seen before."

In our gospel reading today there is a phrase that I have never truly seen before. Verses 51 and 52 tell us, "While Jesus was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy." What jumps off the page is the phrase "great joy."

In the gospel of Luke, there are four occasions for joy. The announcement of Jesus' birth was the first occasion for joy. "But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord'" (Luke 2:10-11).

The second occasion for joy was when the seventy-two returned to Jesus because they had power over the demons (10:17). Jesus corrects them, "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it" (10:23-24).

The third occasion for joy is when a sinner repents. "I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent" (15:7).

And the final occasion is when Jesus ascended into heaven (24:51).

The question for us is how can Jesus' ascension bring great joy to his disciples? Think about it. Jesus is ascending to heaven. Jesus is leaving them. How can they have joy?

I can understand if Jesus was a tyrant. "Yeah, the wicked witch is gone." I can understand if Jesus was a task master. "When the cat is away the mice will play." However, Jesus is not a tyrant. Jesus is not a task master. The disciples are not rebellious teenagers. Even more, with Jesus gone there is no one to intervene when they argue amongst themselves, no one to teach the crowds, and no one to take the blame. So how could the disciples have great joy?

There are four reasons for their great joy.

First, they had great joy because Jesus opened their eyes to see him in the Scriptures. Verses 44-45: "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 and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.' Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures." Jesus is the fulfillment of the Bible.

This means when God said to Abraham: "I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, **18**and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice" (Genesis 22:17-18), God was speaking about Jesus the offspring.

When Isaiah wrote, "Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations" (Isaiah 42:1), Isaiah was referring to Jesus.

When David wrote, "Who is like the LORD our God, who is seated on high, **6**who looks far down on the heavens and the earth? **7**He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap, **8**to make them sit with princes, with the princes of his people" (Psalm 113:5-8), David was writing about Jesus who comes down from heaven to lift the lowly.

Jesus is the fulfillment, the main point of Scripture. That is why he told his disciples: "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it" (10:23-24).

This is significant because the wise and the elite always want to see these things. They want to know the secrets of God so that they can lord it over the people. This way they can sell books and keep job security. God did not reveal his truth to the wise. God did not reveal himself to the priestly class. Instead, God revealed his truth to Mary, the shepherds, fishermen, tax collectors, and Gentiles; sinners like you and me.

"But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. **28**He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, **29**so that no one may boast before him. **30**It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. **31**Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord" (I Corinthians 1:27-31)

There is a funny think about seeing this truth, namely, you are accountable to share it. But how would these simple disciples do this? They are marked men. The world rejected Jesus. The world rejects his followers.

The second reason for joy is the promise of the Holy Spirit. Verses 46-49: “He told them, ‘This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, 47and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.’”

We will speak more about this next week. What is important is that the Holy Spirit is the power behind faithful witness. God does not leave us abandoned. Not only do we have the Scriptures that point to Christ, we also have the Spirit to empower our witness.

The first time I ever led a Bible study, I went home in tears. I thought the group of 15 would become 500 in a few weeks. I thought that since I was so close in age they would really listen to me. I was wrong. The High School students walked all over me. They threw erasers at each other The High School students knew better. They worked me over. I was ready to quit. I remember saying to God, “How can I be a pastor, if I cannot even teach a Bible Study.”

The next day, God answered my prayer. I ran into a parent of one of the students. She thanked me for the Bible study. I thought to myself, “yeah right. Her son was the worst of the bunch.” She went on to tell me that she was down and her son shared with her the Bible study I taught.” I thanked her and went to my car praising God. Here I did a terrible job in teaching, but the Holy Spirit had winged my words. The Holy Spirit is the power behind our witness.

And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, **12** for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say (Luke 12:11-12).

The third reason for joy is the blessing Jesus gives. In verses 50 and 51, Jesus blesses his disciples. Jesus has done this before. However, we read that this time he lifted his hands. Why did Jesus lift his hands? Some say it is because he was giving a benediction before he ascended. That is probably true. However, there is a deeper reason. As he lifted his hands, the disciples would see the nail marks. Those nail marks speak volumes. The marks tell us that God loves us. The marks tell us that on earth there will be suffering. The marks tell us to take heart because Jesus has overcome the world and so too will we. In addition, the marks tell us that we have a High Priest who can sympathize with our weakness and who intercedes for us.

Death destroying, life restoring,
Proven equal to our need
Now for us before the Father
As our brother intercede;
Flesh that for our world was wounded,
Living for the wounded plead!

(Up through Endless Ranks of Angels, verse 2)

The final reason for joy was the breaking of the bread. Earlier in the passage, they had eaten fish and bread with Jesus. As they did, “Jesus was made known to them in the breaking of the bread” (24:35). This might be the most important reason for joy. In the breaking of the bread the disciples knew that Jesus was with them. Even though he is at the right hand of the father, Jesus is present with them in the breaking of the bread. In Acts 2 we see the joy others received in the breaking of the bread:

“Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, **47**praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:46-47).

They are not alone. They are not abandoned. Jesus is with them.

Now back to our original question: How could the disciples have joy knowing Jesus was ascending to the father? How could they not. For they were seeing what kings had longed to see. They were seeing God’s plan of salvation in the flesh. Even more, they were now part of God’s plan of salvation as they were to preach to gospel to the ends of the earth. Of course they could not do it alone. They needed the spirit. Jesus promised the spirit. Jesus also raised his nail pierced hands to bless them. And Jesus would come to them, in the breaking of the bread, to comfort them.

Reformation, have joy on this Ascension Sunday. Not because Jesus has promised an easy go of things. Rather, because you have the Scriptures that point to Jesus. In baptism, the same Holy Spirit has come upon you to empower you as God’s witnesses. In Holy Communion, Jesus is present for you for the forgiveness of sins. You are part of God’s salvation. Spread the news and have great joy!

**In Jesus’ Name,
Amen**