

Luke 24:44-53

Then he said to them, ‘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, 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 Messiah* is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses* of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.’

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

‘It’s All Right To Be Left’

Rev. Charles Schuster

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I have never preached a sermon on the Ascension of Jesus, after his death on the cross and the Easter appearances of the risen Christ. I have never preached a sermon on this subject, and I’ve been doing this a while. There are other things I’ve never preached a sermon on, like how he walked on water, or healed the man who was blind, or raised Lazarus from the dead, and I feel a little like Lou Holtz in his book, *Winning Every Day*. He talks about when the Notre Dame football team played Brigham Young University, and toward the end of the game, time running out, Brigham Young called a pass play, and the Notre Dame linebacker was set up to do a delayed blitz, which, if you know anything about that, he wasn’t going to go in and tackle the quarterback, he faked like he wasn’t, and then he did, and had a clear shot to the quarterback, and the center from Brigham Young University, the only thing he could do was what he did, he grabbed the linebacker from Notre Dame by the neck and slammed him to the turf in a flagrant holding penalty. Anybody could see it, everybody saw it, everybody on the field saw it, everybody in the stadium saw it. Both coaches saw it. Everybody saw it but the referee. For reasons known only to him, he refused to throw the flag, and Holtz said, “I couldn’t believe it, and I felt that that fellow who missed the call should have only received half his officiating fee since he was obviously watching only one team.”

Maybe you ought to pay me only half my salary since I’m not looking at the whole story. Never preached on the Ascension. Well, this morning, the sermon is on the Ascension, because it fits Memorial Weekend, and I want full compensation. The cross. The resurrection. The risen Christ appears, and then he’s delivered up. Luke writes, “While he blessed them, he parted from them.” Mark is more dramatic. Mark writes, “And so then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven, and he sat down at the right hand of God.” The Ascension of Jesus. I found three parts to the story. He opened their minds, we are told. There was a revelation. There was always a revelation. How often he said, “You have heard it said....but I say to you.....” He opened their minds. He exposed what the philosopher Whitehead called “the fallacy of

dogmatic finality,” thinking you know it all when you don’t, or putting it more dramatically, as posted on the bumper of a car, “Don’t let your dogma eat your karma.” Or the insight offered by Golda Meir when she was president of Israel and she said, “Let me tell you one thing I have against Moses. He took us forty years into the desert, in order to bring us to the one place in the Middle East that has no oil.”

Jesus opened their minds about Moses and what it means to be the chosen people. He opened their minds about the law and what it means to live to the spirit of the law, not the letter of the law. He opened their minds about death and how death has not won and will not win any victory. Jesus opened their minds. We remember those who have been with us and who have gone before us. We have stood at the grave and wept. We have walked to the wall and looked at the names. We have listened to the trumpets playing “Taps.” We have carried ashes to a sacred place, or spread them, as we were instructed. We have thought about how fragile life is, and we have pondered the brevity of the time that we have to live. And on this Memorial weekend, it comes back to us. He opened our minds. He opened their minds, the Christian faith will open our minds. It will cause us to think about things we never thought. A revelation comes to us, when we are face to face with the possibility of death, when we mourn those who have gone before us. It will force us to consider things that never occurred to us. It will open our minds.

Forrest Church, a preacher in New York, is facing his death. It will come soon. It’s esophageal cancer. It has opened his mind, and he writes in this book, *Love and Death*, “Religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die. Whether or not there is life after death, surely there is love after death. To live is to risk,” he said. “We risk an enormous pain of loss. We pay for love with pain. It takes more courage to love than to die.” We pay for love with pain. Love is the price we pay, but it’s worth it, in the pain that comes. A revelation, it opens our minds.

It was Leonard Sweet who said, “Crisis doesn’t make the person, it reveals the person for what they are.” Memorial weekend, whether we gather to think of war heroes, we think of those who have given their lives for our freedom. It opens our minds. We think about our time on earth. We think about who we are and what we have done and what it all means. Jesus opened their minds. There was a revelation to them. Memorial weekend opens our minds and there are revelations to us, as we think about all these things.

The second thing he did, Jesus, the last time they saw him before the Ascension, he spoke to his friends, and we are told he led them out. He helped them make a resolution. There’s a story, we’ve probably heard it lots of times, about the six-year-old invited to come in for dinner. Time to eat - comes in, jumps up on the chair, picks up his fork. His mother says, “You know, you’ve been out playing, your hands are dirty, go wash your hands before you eat.” So he does. Climbs down, from the chair, runs to wash his hands, comes back. He climbs up on the chair and picks up his fork again. His dad says, “Now, before we eat, we’re going to offer a prayer. We’re going to thank God for the gifts that we’ve been given.” So he puts down his fork and shakes his head, and in a voice that’s very faint, but is heard by his mother, he says, “Germs and God, germs and God, that’s all I hear around this place, and I ain’t never seen either one of them.”

There comes a time in our lives when we realize the power of things that are not seen, the power of love, for example, the power of faith. The power of hope. The power of resolution. Resolution to keep those whom we love alive in sacred memory, so they will not have died in vain, so that the causes that have been theirs we will promote even after they're gone. Resolution. He led them out. It leads us out when we have resolution to live by.

Lisa and Todd were seniors in Wheaton College when they met in a senior seminar. Their only regret in life was that they didn't meet sooner. They had so much in common, their parents' values very much the same, family loyalty, faith in God, personal integrity, a spirit of independence. It was a storybook romance and it was a storybook life they had together, but it was not a storybook ending. Todd died saving other people's lives. He was not a soldier, but he died in service to the country. He was on a business trip, he died in a plane crash in Pennsylvania, eight years ago, in September, and his last words, "Let's roll." He and others brought down a plane before it crashed into the nation's capital and many, many people would have died. Lisa went back to the spot where Todd had died, and she made a resolution. She says, "I can sink into depression or anger or anxiety, or I can choose now to trust in God. And I don't claim to understand it, but I choose daily, actually moment by moment, to have faith. Not in what is seen, but in what is unseen." And she said, "'Let's roll'" is not a slogan. It's not the title of a book," though it is hers. "It's not a song. It's a lifestyle. It's the lifestyle that Todd and I decided to live, and one that my children and I will carry on."

One day shortly before Christmas, the Christmas after Todd had died, they were unwrapping the ornaments and things and their son David was excited to put his stocking on the fireplace, and she wasn't moving as fast as he thought she should, and so he looked at her, and in a playful voice, reminiscent of his father, he said, "Come on, Mom, let's roll." "I fought back the tears for a moment, and then I said with a little grin on my face, 'You're right, David. Let's roll.'" Lisa Beamer ends her book by remembering the words of a hymn. It's a hymn written by Horatio Spafford, it's a hymn written by a man whose wife and four daughters were killed on a ship that sunk in the Atlantic Ocean. "It is well, it is well with my soul."

What are the resolutions that we have taken from those who have gone before us as they led us out? How have we kept their spirits alive as we lived in remembrance of them, and in what way have we determined to honor them by the way we live? We do that. It was the bread and the cup, and the words, "Do this in remembrance of me" that turned a Passover meal into a permanent tribute. We call it Communion. It's the Last Supper. "He led them out." They made their resolutions to keep his spirit alive.

The most important part of the story, before the Ascension of Jesus, I think, is this. He blessed them. It was renaissance. It was rebirth, the blessing. It was all about the blessing. And you know, there comes a time in our lives when we have to receive the blessing, when we have received it and we know we're blessed. There comes a time when we know

that. There comes a time when we have to move away from the power that empowers us, by being empowered by it.

I bought a new lawn mower. The city paid me money. You turn in your polluting gas lawn mower, and they give you money if you buy one that's electric. My old lawn mower has seen me through three parsonages, and over the years I have mowed over sprinkler heads and grass snakes, I have taken it into rocks and have mulched up newspapers hiding in the weeds. In the last church I served, a church member who didn't like me but liked my wife a whole lot gave us rhubarb, and every now and then I'd let that lawn mower fade over the rhubarb. It felt so good. I have aimed that lawn mower at the worst lawns in three cities. The rope doesn't always pull, the handle is held together with duct tape and wire, and the blade has been sharpened down to where there isn't much left, and the cutting surface has the look of Horsetooth Mountain. And the city paid me some money, and I bought an electric mower, and it has a cord. It has a long cord. It has a 100 foot cord. It reaches around the house, it reaches around the trees, and sometimes it reaches around my neck and hobbles my feet. There's a warning in the instructions that is direct and rude. It says, "Do not push the mower over the electrical cord." It indicates that there's the danger of death, and says that it's not a good idea to mow grass in the rain. It's taken a month for me to figure out how to push this thing. It sounds like a vacuum cleaner. In fact, a neighbor walked up and said, "Why are you vacuuming your lawn?" The primary principle, I've figured it out, is to lay out the power cord and then always move away from the power. Always move away from the cord. That's the principle. It's taken me a month. It's a good principle. When we have been blessed by the power, we become empowered.

Jesus didn't die on the cross so that we would move toward him in a likeness that surrenders our identity. His death, his life, his word, his wisdom, his resurrection, his Ascension, it was all given for the purpose of empowerment, not entrapment. He came to make us free, not to make us his. He meant for us to be disciples, not to become his clones. He carried his cross, not so that we would pick up any old cross that we saw, but so we would pick up the cross that is ours to carry. And his farewell speech did not end with a poem and a recitation of his wisdom. It ended with a blessing. A blessing. No soldier in the distant past, nor in the immediate present, no soldier has died for our freedom thinking we would become patriots who waved our flags so hard that we would allow the loss of freedom that they fought for and died. And if we have heroes who are to us bigger than life, we are not compelled to replicate their witness, but inspired by the way they lived, we find our voice, for our time and place.

Renaissance. Rebirth. It's a consistent message in the Gospel. Once you were born, now you find yourself in a rebirth. Mark Nolan said it, "Don't look back unless you want to go there." Don't do as I say, but if you've heard what I've said, you're blessed to do as you must. He blessed them. He gave them a blessing. He gave us his blessing. The Ascension of Jesus. He opened their minds. You can't be a Christian with a closed mind, and there are revelations that come if the mind is open. He led them out. We are inspired by the example he lived, to keep the truth alive. We are Christians, and there are resolutions we make because of how he was. And he blessed them. We are raised up to rebirth, to find

renaissance, as we discover our voice and plot our course. He was carried up. He ascended. I can no longer say that I never preached a sermon on the Ascension of Jesus, and now that I've done it, it seems that story really is a lot about the ascension of us, the raising up from a revelation to us, to a resolution from us, to a rebirth within us. And if somehow I got that said, and you heard it, the maybe I'll get paid and you'll get your money's worth. I hope so.