

Up, Up, and Away!
Sermon on Luke 24:44-53 Preached at Highland Park UMC
Sunday, May 28, 2006

If you were watching ABC television at 6:15 p.m. on April 1, 1953, you would have heard for the first time these famous words: (Announcer) “Faster than a speeding bullet. More powerful than a locomotive. Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound. (Voices) “Look! Up in the sky!” “It’s a bird!” “It’s a plane!” “It’s Superman!” (Announcer) “Yes, it’s Superman, strange visitor from another planet who came to Earth with powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men. Superman, who can change the course of mighty rivers, bend steel in his bare hands; and who, disguised as Clark Kent, mild-mannered reporter for a great metropolitan newspaper, fights a never ending battle for truth, justice, and the American way.”

A strange visitor from a distant place who comes to Earth with superhuman powers to wage a never-ending battle for truth and justice. Had the announcer not said repeatedly that it was Superman, you might have thought he was talking about Jesus. The person who reads the New Testament for the first time might understandably think that Jesus is indeed some kind of superhero: A man who walks on water and cures the sick and battles the forces of evil; a man who stills raging seas and feeds hungry crowds and works for peace in the world surely must be Superman, mustn’t he?

And yet, like kryptonite, there is one force in the universe that can stop even the strongest and bravest man, can render his power impotent and end his life-saving days. The cross was meant to end Jesus’ heroics, to stop the miracles and the multitudes and the mighty movement that was growing in his wake. Death seemed to be Jesus’ fate, the grave his destiny. But by the power of God, Jesus rose from the grave and left the tomb and conquered death. No force could now contain or overmatch God’s life-giving power.

Because of Jesus, for the disciples, their families, and their communities, life would never be the same again. It had been such an amazing journey: from his calling of fishermen at the Sea of Galilee to his teaching and healing and casting out demons to his crucifixion and resurrection, the disciples had witnessed the ministry of the man who changed the world. Now that journey was coming to an end. Jesus spoke to his disciples as he had so many times before, but this was to be their last lesson. He recapitulated his entire ministry for them, reminding them that he is the fulfillment of what the Old Testament had prophesied about Israel's promised messiah. Just as he had opened the eyes of blind persons and opened the spiritual eyes of two disciples at Emmaus, now Jesus opened the minds of his disciples to understand the scriptures. Only now that Jesus had been crucified and raised could his message of self-giving love make sense. As Alan Culpepper remarks, "The message of the Scriptures is not self-evident; one's mind must be opened to it, and they are rightly understood only in the light of Jesus' death and resurrection."¹

The preaching of repentance and forgiveness, like Jesus' death and resurrection, is foretold in Scripture. "The plan of God already set forth in Scripture contains a message and an offer that constitute the charter of the Christian mission."² The message is that Israel's messiah would suffer, die, and on the third day rise from the dead. The offer is the gift of repentance and forgiveness of sins. This is the disciples' commission to go into all the nations, taking the message to all persons, beginning from Jerusalem. As Tom Wright puts it, "The church is [thus] to be rooted in scripture and active in mission. ... God is now fulfilling the promises made to Abraham, Moses, and the prophets: the world is now to be brought into the embrace of God's saving and healing love."³

¹ R. Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel of Luke with an Introduction, Commentary, and Notes*, New Interpreters Bible, vol. 9 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994) 486.

² Fred B. Craddock, *Luke*, Interpretation (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990) 291.

³ N. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (London: SPCK and Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) 301.

“You are witnesses of these things,” (v. 48) Jesus tells his disciples. The things to which Jesus’ disciples are witnesses are the unfolding of the gospel in Jesus’ life, ministry, teachings, death, and resurrection. They have seen and experienced God’s saving activity, and as witnesses to it they are now to go forth to give testimony to its truth and power. But before the disciples can go out into the world, they must wait to receive “power from on high” (v. 49). When Jesus says, “I am sending upon you what my Father promised” (v. 49) he is giving his disciples authority to preach the message of repentance and forgiveness. “What [the] Father promised” turns out to be the Holy Spirit, which will be the source of the power enabling the disciples’ preaching. With this commission and the promise of power, the disciples are almost ready to be released into the world.

Before they go out to preach the good news of which they are witnesses however, Jesus must depart. And so, having offered them a blessing and entrusted them to God’s care, Jesus “withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven” (v. 51b). In Acts Luke says that while his disciples watched, Jesus “was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight” (1:9). Up, up, and away.

Now you and I might think that the disciples would be sad or uncertain or afraid. That’s how Mark ends his Gospel (16:8). You and I might expect them to take a moment to reflect on everything that had just happened and their job as witnesses. That’s how John ends his Gospel (21:24-25). You and I might guess that they formed a committee to vision and plan for the building of the church. That’s how Matthew ends his Gospel (28:19-20). But we would be wrong. The disciples are not frozen in terror. They do not pause to reflect or dwell on Jesus’ promised presence. No, the disciples “worshiped [Jesus] and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God” (Lk. 24:52-53). Joseph Fitzmyer

says, “Only Luke has the courage to depict his Christian community engaged in what it should be doing.”⁴ Worship is the only appropriate response to what God has done for us in Jesus Christ: to offer continually thanks, praise, worship, and blessing to God.

So what does this story mean to us? Is this the end of an epic tale of a superhero, his work accomplished, now returning to his home far away? Is this the beginning of the saga of God’s people called the Church? The answer is yes, and so much more. Yes, it is the end in the sense that this is Jesus’ last appearance to his assembled disciples, the last time his disciples will behold Jesus in person on Earth. Yes, it is the beginning in the sense that the disciples have received their commission as witnesses to and preachers of the good news about Jesus Christ.

But even more important, the Ascension of Jesus means that Jesus has entered into glory with his heavenly Father. There in the heavens, Jesus sits exalted and enthroned at the right hand of God, “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come” (Eph. 1:21). From his glorious status Jesus will send the promised Holy Spirit upon his disciples and invest them with power from on high. Ascension means the work of the human Jesus is complete, his mission is accomplished, his faithful obedience is rewarded. Now and forevermore Jesus reigns with God in glory.

And just as the Ascension closes the period of Jesus’ ministry, so it opens the period of the church’s mission. Although Jesus’ form is no longer visibly present to his Church, he is graciously with us in the breaking of bread. Although Jesus’ physical hands and feet are no longer present, he graciously chooses our hands and feet to reach out to the lonely, to cure the sick, to carry the message of God’s love and grace and mercy. Although Jesus’ human body has ascended into heaven, by his grace the Church is his body present to the world to serve and to

⁴ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1985) 1591.

bles. Let us then go forth in the power of the Holy Spirit to do the work to which we are called: to love God (Deut. 6:5) and the neighbor (Lev. 19:8), to do justice and love kindness (Amos 6:8), to look after widows and orphans in their distress (Jas. 1:27), to proclaim the good news that Jesus Christ crucified, risen, and ascended is with us and will come again in glory. Up, friends, up and away!