

A Message of Forgiveness

Luke 24:44-53 (May 16, 2021)

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⁴⁴Then 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.”

⁴⁵Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹And 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.”

⁵⁰Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. ⁵¹While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. ⁵²And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; ⁵³and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Historical Context

Luke has two accounts of the Ascension, one in the gospel, one in Acts. The one in the gospel is placed at the end of Jesus’ ministry (Luke 24:44-53) and its purpose seems to be the *vindication* of his ministry. The one in Acts is placed at the beginning of the apostles’ ministry (Acts 1:6-11) and the purpose seems to be the *authorization* of their work of proclamation.

Theme: A Message of Forgiveness

A strong emphasis on forgiveness is implicit and explicit in the text on the Ascension. The very appearance of the resurrected Christ to his disciples is first and foremost a message of forgiveness. The ones who fled and denied Jesus are not reminded of their cowardice and faintness of heart. Rather his first words to his confused and bewildered followers are, “Peace be with you” (Luke 24:36). Moreover, this is not a word meant only for his closest companions during his earthly ministry. This radical word of mercy is to inform the entire mission of the disciples for he tells them “repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations” (Luke 24:47).

And the ascension of Christ himself underlines this mission of mercy. What it is often overlooked is the actual way that Jesus took leave of his followers. We are told that Jesus and his disciples go to Bethany where “...lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven” (Luke 24:50-51). Jesus’ departure to heaven is accompanied by a blessing of lifted hands. These are the very hands that still bore the wounds of one who was murdered on a Roman cross. He has commissioned the first witnesses of his ascension and then he provides them with a remarkable message of forgiveness. Let us remember that these witnesses themselves were complicit in his execution. But the last image of their betrayed leader is a dramatic sign of mercy.