

## It's not the End Yet!

Luke 24:44–53

Dear Friends in Christ, grace and peace from our risen and ascended Lord, Jesus.

The season of Easter reminds us that Easter Sunday declares that the battle against Satan was fought for us by Jesus, and then he takes the scepter of victory.

Dr. Luke in his Gospel and in the Book of Acts, he informs us that forty days after Jesus' resurrection from the dead, he gathered his apostles and from their midst ascended into heaven. And Ascension is the capstone of Jesus' victory, indeed Christ has risen from the dead. So, on this Sunday we do reflect on the day of Ascension. The day when Jesus ascended to heaven to be crowned by the Father with glory and honor. That day when the Father gave him dominion over the works of his hands; he indeed has put all things under his feet, he indeed is our King. There he took possession of and occupancy of the throne of glory given to the victor over evil. And on Ascension Day, as Christ takes his rightful seat of glory, honor, he also takes his rightful rule for the Church. And even more, his ascension raises us to heavenly heights too.

I wonder how it was for the disciples back then, though. Their circle of 13, Jesus and the twelve, or eleven at that time, is coming to an end.

I'm not sure about you, but I don't like goodbyes, I don't like endings where there is a definitive goodbye. Yet happy endings can be very good too. And I think that most people like happy endings. So, on Ascension Day, in a way we celebrate a happy ending. The ending to the mission of Jesus on earth, the mission that liberates humans from sin and death. But we also hear him say, "I am with you to the end of time," and "you are witnesses to the ends of the earth." Happy endings, and happy beginnings too. As we reflect on Ascension Day, I would like to reflect on three things that Ascension helps us celebrate, three temporary endings, endings but not yet...

First, the ascension of Jesus marked the ending of his mission on earth. Jesus had willingly come down to earth as a little human baby. It took more than thirty years to earn our freedom. And it was hard work—living a perfect life, proclaiming the kingdom, doing miracles, suffering pain, being crucified on a cross and buried in a tomb,

rising to life. “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” (vv 44–45).

Jesus says.

After his resurrection, for forty days Jesus proved he was really alive. Then, it was time to ascend to heaven to a hero’s welcome. “And [Jesus] led [the disciples] out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven” (vv 50–51). And for his enormous victory, Jesus was honored by being seated at the right hand of the throne of God. His sacrifice was accepted, the work of salvation done! That part was a wonderful ending!

But the disciples weren’t so ready for the words “The End.” As happy as they were to see Jesus’ triumph, they were also puzzled about losing him as their leader.

But Jesus shows them how the end of his physical presence was not the end of an illustrious career. Jesus was not going to go into retirement. He was going to remain active through the disciples for the purpose of accomplishing the saving of people. So he tells them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things” (vv 46–48). As you see his mission has not ended yet.

Christ’s mission to liberate the world was complete in one way. “It is finished,” Jesus said from the cross, and it was (Jn 19:30). It is. But in another way, Jesus’ mission was just beginning. There was no more dying to be done for sins. Yet, that salvation was to be proclaimed to the end of the earth, and he does it through the work of the Church, Jesus tells us: “You will be my witnesses . . . to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

This is the second ending to reflect upon this Ascension Day—the extent, the limit, how far it is that we are to go with the good news. It is necessary to bring knowledge and medicine of the Gospel to them, the message of forgiveness in Christ. If it’s to be helpful for people, they need to know what it is. For it to be helpful for you, someone had to bring you the message. It may have been a friend, a parent, a preacher, a missionary, a teacher.

It is through the sharing of that Word that the Holy Spirit opens hearts and minds to believe and to live. Luke 24 spoke of how Jesus opened the disciples' eyes to the truth about him in Scripture. In Ephesians, Paul prays that their "hearts and minds may be opened" to see the great riches of salvation that are theirs through faith in Christ.

We are, in a way, in the delivery business. Delivery businesses are booming with online sales. Trucking companies don't produce anything; they deliver objects others have made. Trains deliver tons of grain and coal and cars that have been produced elsewhere.

The church is in the delivery business, not the manufacturing business. We do not make our own salvation. We cannot make another person's salvation. We are here to deliver what Jesus bought and paid for and wants to be given freely to the world.

And so Jesus says in our text "you are witnesses," no, he didn't say "you are observers," he said witness. To be a witness of a crime can be a life-changing experience. To be a witness of what God has done in Christ also changes our life. We, of course, were not there with the first disciples to see Jesus on the cross and, after Easter, to see him ascending. But by the power of the Holy Spirit, we have firsthand knowledge of who Jesus is, and what it means to be forgiven. We know our destiny as a Christian is to share the eternal joys of Christ in his kingdom, for he will come back to take us to be with him.

Until he comes again, the purpose of your life is to be his witness, sharing the Gospel through which disciples are made—to the ends of the earth, and until the end of time. There is no higher purpose, no greater reward in life, than to have been the instrument through whom God gave the gift of life and freedom in Christ.

But that's it, we are just instruments, everything else is his work. And so Jesus gives us the third ending to reflect upon: "I will be with you always, to the very end of the age" (see Mt 28:20). Christ is with us to the end of time. He loves us to the end. Why? Not only to preserve and protect his people, but so that our mission, his mission through us, may be accomplished.

Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to us to give us the power to be effective witnesses of what Jesus said and did. You remember Superman, right? Every time Clark Kent had a mission, he went into a telephone booth to strip off his ordinary business suit,

revealing his official Superman clothes. He could only stop trains and lift skyscrapers when he was properly clothed in the outfit that revealed his true identity.

As Christians, we are clothed by God with the Holy Spirit, so that we can do what he asks. In Baptism, we are clothed in Christ. His promise to be with us always is literally true—for he never leaves. He does not promise that we will leap tall buildings or even do miracles. But he will give us the words we need to say. Through his Word, he empowers us to do what he asks us to do. “Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom 10:17).

You and I may wonder about just how much God can do through the life of one person. Well, just look at what happened when the disciples did what they were told: “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” (Lk 24:49). They received that power on Pentecost, then thousands became believers.

And we have advantages they did not have: the opportunity to share our faith freely, to gather for worship without fear of reprisal. We have a prosperity they couldn't have dreamed of, means of communication that literally enable us to bring the Gospel to the ends of the earth, if only we had the will to do it.

But we do have his being with us today, even as he, Jesus, seats on his throne, he is with us. This is good news, because even when he is not with us in the flesh, he indeed is with us through his word and the Sacraments, through his Spirit. His ascension had to take place, so that his Kingdom might start, and continue properly the mission for the rest of the world. His work continues, now, and he is directing it from the proper heavenly place.

No, Jesus didn't abandon his disciples, nor abandoned us, on his ascension, on the contrary his ascension marks begins and marks for us intense form of intimacy. As you see, for him to have moved to heaven, to live fully in the divine form, does not mean to move from us, rather it meant to take his right place not only as the King of the World, but from there, from a higher place that stands outside of space, to be the King and Lord of all, and from there to be present everywhere. Seating at the right side of the Father, like a strong and wise general of a strong army, Jesus has the higher point of vantage, where he can see the entire field of battle and direct operations more

efficaciously. He has that point of vantage yet is with each one of us in the field, he wins battles for us.

So, was his ascension and ending? Of course, yet it was just the beginning. The ending of his mission on earth in the flesh, certainly came to be a happy ending, he won victory over death and the devil. It was a marvelous ending indeed. But it was also the beginning where he brings us along to walk, live and join with him in that mission, making things new for us, and for those who will hear the Gospel too. He is now the director, the commander, and the guide in our lives, bringing us to him and with him. But those who die without faith in Jesus will have a miserable eternity. But all who trust in Jesus will have a happy and blessed ending to their life—eternal peace and joy! The ascension of Jesus is a happy ending to his earthly ministry, but it is more. It reminds us of our unfinished mission to bring the Gospel to the ends of the earth through our witness and gifts. And it reminds us that until the end of time, Christ is with us, that we may be faithful and effective witnesses.

In His name amen.