

150th Anniversary Service

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(Luke 24:46-49 ESV)*

You Are Witnesses Of These Things

November 19th, 2023

Luke 24:44-49

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Introduction:

Good morning everyone and happy 150th anniversary!! If you have your Bible with you, I would love for you to open it now to Luke 24:44-49; that’s on page 885 in the church Bibles. I had originally planned to have a guest speaker today for our Anniversary Sunday and then I was going to follow that up with a bit of a vision casting message next Sunday before getting into our Advent series the Sunday following but as Providence would have it, our speaker was not able to come and so we have TWO SUNDAYS that we can use to REVISIT the mission of the church.

As many of you will know, there are FOUR Great Commission passages in the New Testament – 5 if you count the duplicate of Matthew’s Great Commission in the Gospel of Mark - they are not merely 4 different versions of the same conversation; rather they each relate 4 discussions that Jesus had with his disciples in which he spoke about their on-going mission in the world. These conversations took place at different times and in different settings during the 40 days that Jesus was with the disciples between his resurrection and glorious ascension.

In chronological order the first one of these conversations took place on Easter Sunday evening – that is the one recorded in John 20:19-23. The disciples are hiding in Jerusalem behind locked doors. They are still trying to figure things out at this point. They know the tomb is empty. They know that Jesus has already appeared to some of the women in their group and they are starting to remember some of the ODD things that Jesus said about rising from the dead and they are starting to realize that maybe those weren’t METAPHORS, maybe those were PREDICTIONS.

Maybe Jesus knew that he would have to ACTUALLY DIE and maybe Jesus knew that he would physically, BODILY, ACTUALLY RISE from the dead on the third day, according to the Scriptures and they are just starting to connect the dots on all that and then all of the sudden, passing right through the walls:

Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” 20 When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. 21 Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” 22 And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.” (John 20:19-23 ESV)

That’s the first of these Great Commission passages, chronologically speaking. We’ll be looking at that passage NEXT WEEK. Partly because that’s the confusing and somewhat controversial one and I thought it would be rude to confuse and upset you on Anniversary Sunday; you’ll have to come back next week for that. ☺

The second Great Commission passage, in terms of chronology, is the one we referenced last Sunday – the one found in Matthew 28:18-20; that one took place while the disciples were up in Galilee. We talked about that as we looked at the ending of the Acts of the Apostles because Paul understood Rome as just the GATEWAY to a wider mission to the nations that was supposed to be the focus now of the church moving forward. The Jews in Acts 28 REJECTED THE GOSPEL. That door was closed and so Paul understood the Spirit as directing the church to take the Gospel to the nations.

That brings us to Luke – the passage that lies open before you now. This is the THIRD of the Great Commission conversations; it takes place in Jerusalem probably just hours before the ascension of Jesus. The fourth and final Great Commission passage is found in Acts 1:1-8. It takes place on the Mount Olives just moments before Jesus ascends up into heaven. We looked at that passage at the beginning of our journey through Acts, meaning that in the last 14 months we’ve covered the 2nd and the 4th Great Commission passages, so now, since we have these TWO WEEKS between the end of our series in Acts and the start of our Advent series in December, I thought we would take the opportunity to complete the set. Anniversaries are the perfect time to

revisit the mission and mandate of the church, so we'll do that using Luke 24:44-49 this week and then John 20:19-23 next week.

Hear now the Word of the Lord:

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 and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." 45 Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, 46 and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, 47 and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. 48 You are witnesses of these things. 49 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." (Luke 24:44-49 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

I want to show you four things in this passage. In his final hours on the earth Jesus speaks to his disciples about:

1. **A prophesy to be fulfilled**
2. **A mission to be executed**
3. **An identity to be embraced**
4. **A provision to be received**

First of all then, he speaks to them about:

A Prophecy To Be Fulfilled:

Zoom in on verses 45-47. Jesus opens the minds of the disciples to understand TWO THINGS. First of all, he helps them understand how the Bible prophesied that the Messiah would have to DIE and RISE again. We wonder if he was walking them through Isaiah 53 there or maybe Zechariah 12 – Luke doesn't say; he just records Jesus saying:

“Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, 47 **and** that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.” (Luke 24:46-47 ESV)

So we’ve got TWO STREAMS OF PROPHECY here. The first one about the death and resurrection of Messiah – obviously Jesus took care of that; all of those prophecies are fulfilled in him - and then there is this SECOND STREAM OF PROPHECY, having to do with repentance and forgiveness being proclaimed in his name, TO ALL NATIONS, beginning from Jerusalem – that’s the group of prophecies having to do with us. Jesus took care of ACT 1, you might say, and now he is sending US out to fulfill ACT 2 – in the power that he provides, we’ll get to that in just a minute, but for now we need to know what writings in the Old Testament Jesus is referring to here.

Thus it is written, that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem – well, WHERE in the Old Testament does it prophesy THAT?

Most scholars and preachers over the years have believed that Jesus was referring primarily to prophecies made by Isaiah – so if you have your Bible open in front of you, flip left a couple of hundred pages to Isaiah 49:6; that’s on page 610 in your church Bible. There the prophet records a conversation between GOD and his chosen servant, the Messiah, and he says:

“It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” (Isaiah 49:6 ESV)

So God says to Messiah – to Christ – “we’re not going to send you out JUST to save the people of Israel – that would be too small a job for such an EXALTED SERVANT – we’re going to send you out to be a light to the NATIONS that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

So there is the prophecy about the salvation of Jesus Christ being taken to the ends of the earth. But what about the part about it all starting up in Jerusalem? Where do we get that, because Jesus specifically refers to that. Well, that’s found in Isaiah as well. Flip a few more pages left to Isaiah chapter 2; that’s on page 567 in the church Bibles. In Isaiah 2:2-3 it says:

“It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it, and many peoples shall come, and say: “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD **from Jerusalem.**” (Isaiah 2:2-3 ESV)

Wow! That’s an exciting prophecy isn’t it? Isaiah says that the MOUNTAIN of the Lord’s HOUSE is going to GROW and GROW and GROW! That sounds a lot like Jesus’ parable of the mustard seed doesn’t it? It’s going to start small but it is going to get bigger and bigger and bigger until it fills the whole earth. The House of the Lord, Jesus said, has been GROUND DOWN to a single stone – HIM! He calls himself the Cornerstone – so HE is the TRUE STONE OF ISRAEL – he is the new foundation – and the CHURCH is being built up on him! That was the vision and the understanding of the Apostles! Paul said to a bunch of Gentiles:

“you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, 21 in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.” (Ephesians 2:19-21 ESV)

So Gentile stones are being laid side by side with Jewish stones and the whole house is being renovated and reconstituted upon the foundation of the prophets and apostles with Christ as Cornerstone!!

Hallelujah!

And Peter took up that imagery too, he said:

“Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house” (1 Peter 2:4-5 NRSV)

So come on!! Come on in! Slide your stone right up over here and become a part of the newly constituted, Jesus-founded, Spirit-filled House of God! It’s going to be GREAT and it’s going to be HUGE! Get in now!

That was Peter's call and that was the invitation of the Apostolic Gospel. The Lord is gathering in LIVING STONES from every tribe, tongue and nation on planet earth and he's making the BIGGEST HOUSE, the LARGEST NATION, the most GLORIOUS PEOPLE the world has ever seen!

And he's beginning this process in Jerusalem – Isaiah says that in chapter 2 verse 3.

“For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD **from Jerusalem.**” (Isaiah 2:3 ESV)

That is the prophecy that the church needs to fulfill, Jesus says, AS HE SPEAKS TO THE DISCIPLES IN JERUSALEM. Remember? In our passage in Luke 24 he said:

“But stay **in the city** until you are clothed with power from on high.” (Luke 24:49 ESV)

So everything fits. That's the prophecy that needs to be fulfilled and we SEE that prophecy beginning to BE fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2 as 3000 people who were in Jerusalem for the festival hear the Gospel being preached by the disciples - in their own native languages – they hear the message, they believe it, they repent of their sins, they put their faith in Jesus, they are baptized and added to the church that very day.

Praise the Lord!

This prophecy in Isaiah has begun to be fulfilled and it continues to be fulfilled. Every time a soul is converted, every time a new stone is added – the mountain of the Lord's House gets bigger and the return of the Lord draws nearer – hallelujah!

Alright, so we've got a prophesy to be fulfilled, AND very much connected to that, we've got:

A Mission To Be Executed:

The role of the church in this process is specifically spelled out in verse 47 when Jesus says that:

“repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations” (Luke 24:47 ESV)

We talked about REPENTANCE a couple of weeks ago when we were looking at Paul’s speech before Agrippa because Paul talked about his own sense of mission as basically a call to the ministry of repentance. He said Jesus sent him out to the nations:

“to open their eyes, so that **they may turn** from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.” (Acts 26:18 ESV)

We talked about how the word “REPENT” basically means “to turn”. It means to TURN FROM darkness TO light; it means to TURN FROM the power of Satan TO God. That’s clearly how Paul understood it, because he tells Agrippa that as soon as he received this commission he went out and began telling Jews and Gentiles:

“that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance.” (Acts 26:20 ESV)

So that’s the mission! That’s the part we play, as the church, in fulfilling this prophecy. We tell people that they can RETURN to God through the person and work of Christ. They can LEAVE BEHIND the works of darkness and the POWER of Satan and be RESTORED. Restored to GOD and restored to themselves.

That’s the Gospel!

The Gospel is the Good News that because of Christ we can BE who we were originally created and intended to be! People who DELIGHT IN GOD and who RULE over all the earth.

The Gospel is the Good News that we can stop living like animals and we can be reconciled to our Creator and restored to our original dignity and calling – that’s Great News! And that’s our message and proclaiming that message is our mission.

Do you still believe that message church?

And are you still committed to proclaiming that message to people from every tribe, tongue and nation on planet earth?

Because there are a lot of “so called Christians” today who don’t seem to believe in that message. Who don’t seem to believe that people can turn from the works of darkness to the light and that people can be released from the power of Satan to return to God. They’re preaching a new Gospel now; a different Gospel that is not the Gospel of the Bible. They are saying that God will come to us, as it were, that he will embrace us in the mud and leave us in the mud because that is the mud that we have chosen. They’re saying that God will AFFIRM our choices and CELEBRATE our identities – as we have constructed them.

But that’s not the Gospel.

The Gospel is not the HORRIBLE NEWS that God will put a VENEER over human beings in their fallen and decrepit state; the Gospel is about how God RESCUES US and RESUSCITATES US and RESTORES US to our original dignity and calling!

The Gospel is about BEING FORGIVEN **AND** ABOUT BEING FREE!

FREE from the penalty of sin immediately, and FREE from the POWER of sin progressively so that we can GET UP from the mud we’ve been wallowing in and LEAVE IT BEHIND.

Hallelujah!

A Gospel that leaves you in your sin and confusion and self-destruction is not the Gospel – that is not the message that we were entrusted with. Our message is about conversion and change and growth and glory. Our message is GOOD NEWS - thanks be to God!

So that’s our mission: proclaiming this Good News to the nations. So we’ve got a prophecy to be fulfilled and a mission to be executed and then thirdly, we have:

An Identity To Be Embraced

In verse 48 Jesus says:

“You are witnesses of these things.” (Luke 24:48 ESV)

You are WITNESSES.

That’s a helpful way of positioning things. We are not the judge – we don’t actually DECIDE who goes to heaven and who goes to hell. And we’re not the jury – we’re not the people weighing the value and truthfulness of the things being said – we’re the witnesses. Witnesses just speak about what they’ve seen and what they know.

That’s our job.

Tell people what you’ve SEEN and what you KNOW.

Has the Lord opened your eyes? Has he helped you see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ – then tell other people what you’ve seen! Tell other people what you’ve learned! Tell other people who you’ve found!

That’s the job!

That’s all the Lord is asking from you – and that’s good because I can’t “build the kingdom” or “establish justice” or “make the world a better place” – all of that stuff is way above my pay grade. But I can tell a story. I can speak about what I’ve seen and what the Lord has been kind enough to show me. I can point people to Jesus and I can tell them why I believe that he really is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. I can tell them why I believe that he really is God in human flesh. I can tell them why I believe that he really is the first born of the new creation. I can tell them that.

And then what God DOES WITH THAT in their hearts is entirely up to him.

We're witnesses.

Now, some of you need to hear that as a call to REIGN IT IN. Right? You've been out there trying to burn down the house. You've been out there trying to TAKE CONTROL of the government. Now of course, in a democracy we all have a responsibility to vote and to speak to our MPs and MPPs and even to attend to rallies and to protest overreach and injustice – YES, YES, YES – but we need to be absolutely clear that the Kingdom of God does not come in such ways. A marginally better democracy might come in such ways – but that's not the Kingdom of God and so we mustn't put our HOPE in such things and we mustn't think that when we DO SUCH things as CITIZENS that we are DOING KINGDOM WORK.

No we're not.

That may be helpful work, that may be necessary work, that may be GOOD work – but it is NOT the mission of the church.

We're witnesses – not political agitators; and not revolutionary warriors – so SOME of you may need to hear this as a call to REIGN IT IN a little bit.

But I don't suspect that there are MANY people like that here this morning. In fact I suspect most of you need to hear this, not as a call to reign it in but as a call to RAMP IT UP. Too many evangelicals in this country are just standing off to the side, eating a bag of Doritos watching the world go to hell in a handbasket.

“Look at those lunatics! Man, those people are on a road that leads to nowhere!”

That's not helpful! We need more Gospel believing Christians in this country willing to WAVE THE JESUS FLAG. We need you to say:

“Come on over here! There is a better way to live! There is a ROAD that leads back home! You don't have to keep going down that way. You don't have to keep burning everything down thinking you are going to find something better underneath. There is nothing better underneath!

You are just digging a highway to hell. Stop. Leave that road entirely and come on over here and follow Christ. He is the WAY, the TRUTH and the LIFE! He can take you home! Back to God! Back to yourself! Back to the glory you were made for in the beginning.”

That’s your job!

Wave the Jesus flag! Tell the truth! Extend the invitation. Point to the door!

You’re a witness. You’ve seen the way home. You’ve seen the future. You’ve tasted the age to come – now open your mouth, raise your voice and spread the news.

And of course, do it all in the power that God provides – that’s the fourth thing I want you to see here. We’ve got a prophesy to be fulfilled, a mission to be executed, an identity to be embraced and:

A Provision To Be Received:

In verse 49 Jesus says:

“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.” (Luke 24:49 ESV)

I like that Jesus says: “Don’t even TRY THIS until you have received power from on high. If you try to engage the Great Commission without the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit you’re going to be cannon fodder out there. This is NOT something you can do on your own.”

That’s good counsel.

The Great Commission is an impossible task.

Full stop.

And do you know why the Great Commission is an impossible task?

Because people are dead in their trespasses and sins – and dead people are generally unresponsive to the Good News. Dead people are TERRIBLE listeners to begin with and as a group they lack the will to make positive change.

Because they're dead.

But if the Holy Spirit is inside of you and if, when words come out of your mouth, the Holy Spirit is inside of them, then you are going to see DEAD PEOPLE come back to life.

Like Lazarus coming out of the tomb when people hear the voice of Jesus inside your voice – they are going to come stumbling out of the darkness and you are going to help them throw off the clothes of death so that they can begin to put on CHRIST and so that they can begin to WORSHIP GOD and so that they can begin to live again as the people they were created and intended to be – that's what you are going to do WHEN you are clothed with power from on high.

You're going to be in the miracle business!

You're going to be in the resurrection business!

And by the grace of God we've been in this business now for 150 years and let me state the obvious: It has never been about us. It has never been about our gifts and abilities. It has always been about him. It's about what HE DID. It is about HIS LIFE and HIS DEATH and HIS RESURRECTION on our behalf. We're just the messengers. We're just witnesses. We're just VESSELS for the Spirit of God to tell the story of redemption to lost men and women from every tribe, tongue and nation on planet earth.

Through us he is going to OPEN EYES, EMPTY GRAVES and BUILD A KINGDOM.

He's going to do it. One life, one soul, one STONE at a time. And the mountain of the Lord's house is going to grow and fill the earth – people will take their friends and loved ones by the hand and say: "Come let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob;

that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” For out of Zion shall go the law and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.”

So it was said. So it was done. And so it goes on – in the power and provision of the Spirit – thanks be to God!

Will you pray with me?