

# The Disciples and the Final Sighting

*Jesus: From Tomb to Throne*

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**Bible Text:** Luke 24:44-53  
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In our little series these Wednesdays, we've come to the fifth part of the series and describes, in fact, the ascension of our Lord Jesus which is recorded at the end of Luke's Gospel, and when Luke picks up the second part of his two-volume work at the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles as all good authors of two-volume works do, he has this little section in the beginning. If he were a contemporary author, it would be in italics, the story thus far where he retells in different words what he describes in chapter 24.

So let's read the passage today. Then Jesus said to them, this is on Easter Sunday evening when the disciples have gathered together. The two who were on the Emmaus Road have rushed back and they're all celebrating the Lord's resurrection and Jesus appears and says to them,

44 ... "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. [He's referring to the gift of the Holy Spirit.] But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high." 50 And he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. 51 While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. 52 And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, 53 and were continually in the temple praising God.

Well, let me add to Matthias' welcome to you, a word of welcome if this is the first time that you've shared a meal with us on Wednesdays. At first, we hope that perhaps it will whet your appetite to join us again on future occasions. As he said, we are almost at the end now of a series of talks in which we've been focusing our attention these weeks, six week period, which covers 40 or 42 days by an inclusive reckoning. We're thinking about the six weeks in which Jesus seemed to have conducted an intermittent seminar with his

disciples. He appeared to them, as we are told here in the first part of the passage that we read on Easter Sunday, and then there are these various occasions, actually there are other particular occasions, but we've been looking at a number of occasions in which Jesus during this six week period appeared to his disciples, sometimes to them in large gatherings, sometimes to them as individuals.

We began by thinking about the couple who were on the way to Emmaus and how the Lord Jesus came and opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, that their whole Bible, actually, pointed to him and prepared for him, and how their reaction to that was to say to one another when Jesus mysteriously simply left them, "Was your heart burning when he spoke to us about the Old Testament Scriptures on the way?" The kind of thing that we do when perhaps we leave church on a Sunday morning or Sunday night, and we say to our wife or to our husband or to somebody we know who won't think that we're absolutely off our rockers, "My heart was, my heart was on fire as I was listening to that this evening." And they know not to tell you to go and see a cardiologist. They understand that you have experienced the presence of the Lord Jesus and not just whoever has been preaching from the pulpit; you've experienced the presence of the Lord Jesus with you.

And Jesus continued to do this. We then thought about Jesus meeting with Simon Peter, in particular, and what was a bitter and also a sweet experience for him, the reminder of his failure and his denial of the Lord Jesus, and those wonderful words of challenge and cleansing as the Lord Jesus put his spiritual surgeon's knife into him and, as it were, cut out the vestiges of self, and we find Peter in a fresh way forgiven and recommissioned.

Then we thought about the seminar that Jesus taught them, how he, in those days, must have gone over everything that had taken him three years before, and they still didn't understand. But now in a matter of a few weeks in the light of his resurrection, it begins to dawn on them how everything fits together. I think it must have been like this. I know a little of this, as some of you know, from personal experience. They were people who knew the Bible fairly well but they never actually discovered the secret to the Bible. They had a missing piece of the jigsaw puzzle. This seemed all about history and war and people singing praise to God and God being with people, but it didn't seem to be going anywhere and they had missed the real point and Jesus put that piece of the jigsaw puzzle in and they saw that the Bible is actually about Jesus.

Now you might think, "But we know the Bible is about Jesus," but, of course, what they were discovering was the Jesus about whom the Bible speaks and there can be a radical difference between these two things, knowing what's in the Bible and knowing the one who actually makes sense of the Bible. If I can put it this way, the Bible doesn't make sense of itself, the Bible makes sense of Jesus, and Jesus makes sense of the Bible. So if you don't know Jesus, the thing hasn't yet made sense to you and now it was all beginning to make sense to them.

Then last time, we saw how Jesus had introduced them to the name of God and given them and us a privilege that actually nobody in history before this had ever had and we

treat it so casually. The end of our services, we use the names the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in most of our churches, and it never crosses our mind that it's only for 2,000 years out of world history that anybody has known to call God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

So this 40 day seminar was absolutely jam-packed with teaching from Jesus, teaching about Jesus, and this wonderful new discovery of who God is and what that would mean for their Christian lives, and my guess is it's in the light of that that so many of the things that Jesus had already taught them began to make sense to them. Remember how he says the very night of his arrest, "Have I been with you for three years and you still don't know who I am?" But now the end apparently is coming and what's described here by Luke is that Jesus takes them outside the city of Jerusalem, verse 50, "he led them out as far as Bethany," and he pronounced the benediction on them. He blessed them and while he was blessing them, he disappeared. Luke will tell us at the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles that he actually disappeared in a cloud and they were not going to see him again.

Remember what it was like in the good old days. Well, it was hot in Columbia, I know, but if you can, you've forgotten about the fact that 50 years ago, 60 years ago, or 20 years ago, during the school, the long vacation in the summer and you just kind of forget about the heat. Imagine that that long vacation is in the Highlands of Scotland and you're breathing the purest air in the world and you're speaking the purest English spoken anywhere outside of Columbia. And at the beginning, the holidays felt as though they were going to last forever, didn't they? I think if I remember rightly, eight weeks when I was a college student, get your exams over in May, June, July, August and September and because there were so few university places, if you got one, they stuffed money into your pocket and said, "Now do a little work and go and enjoy yourselves." Four months long. Long lies, leisurely rounds of golf, meetings with friends, and at the beginning it seems as though it's going to last forever and then the day before school begins, you know? "Oh, we didn't treasure those days. We didn't use them as well as we should have."

Now here's my question: why does Luke tell us that the disciples' response to Jesus leaving them was the very reverse of my experience, I imagine your experience, at the end of the vacation that seemed as though it was going to last forever? They must have thought when they met Jesus again, "He's back! We've got him! He's here!" Everything that they had been discouraged about suddenly transformed into encouragement, so why do they not feel doubly let down when Jesus says, "I'm going away again and this time I'm really going away"? Because you notice what Luke tells in verse 52 and 53, the words that he uses, they worshiped him, they returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Now, one of my granddaughters, if you say anything to her, it doesn't matter what you say to her, she says, "Why? Why?" So let me use my granddaughter's question: why? You remember the last time Jesus had said, "I am leaving you," John had told us that sorrow had filled their heart, they were in deep distress, so what's so different now when

Jesus says, "I am going to leave you," and then he does actually leave them? Well, of course, something had changed, several things had changed, and here are four of those things, there are more than four but there is certainly not time for more than four this afternoon.

1. They understood the Gospel far better. Actually, they thought they had understood the Gospel, sometimes they made a fairly serious distinction between themselves and the great unwashed who weren't themselves, those other people who weren't in the inner circle, but they didn't really understand the Gospel at all. They had been with Jesus for three years and the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle had not yet clicked in their minds, but now at last they understood the Gospel. It had all begun with the two on the road to Emmaus when Jesus had said to them, "Let me take you again through the Bible and let me point out the verses that you've heard so often but you've never understood." And he took passages from the Old Testament Scriptures that prophesied his coming and spoke of what he would do and said, "Now do you see it was absolutely necessary that what has just happened outside Jerusalem should happen?"

That was God's plan from the beginning. I've no doubt, for example, he pointed them to Isaiah 53, don't you think, and the prophecy of the Savior who would come, who would be wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities, chastised to bring us peace, with whose strips we would be made whole, and pointed to the end of that passage that speaks about a coming Savior making his grave with the wicked and also with a rich man, and that had just happened a couple of days ago. He'd been crucified as though he were wicked, one of the wicked ones, and in the center of the thieves, because he was viewed as the most wicked of the wicked ones. At the same time in a strange way, Joseph of Arimathea of whom we never know anything, stepped forward and said, "I have a grave in which no one has ever been laid. I'd like to place the body of Jesus in the grave of a rich man.

And now they'd begun to understand, they'd begun to understand especially this, that the death of the Lord Jesus rather than being a tragedy was a work of divine victory, and that in the death of Jesus, there was the ransom price that they needed paid for their sins, and so what he had done in his death was to die for their sins, and what he'd done in his resurrection was to rise to reassure them his sacrifice had been accepted and that he was going to be with them. That was a revolution in their lives and now as the Scriptures tell us, as Luke tells us at the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles, he gave many infallible proofs that he really was alive. So now instead of mourning, they were dancing, they were experiencing what the Psalmist says, "You have turned my mourning into dancing," because at last they understood what the Gospel was.

The second thing that I think made a difference to them was because they understood that whereas they thought Jesus' death had been the end, they realized that Jesus now going from them in his ascension to the right hand of God was not the end but just the end of a new beginning. The end of a new beginning. Do you remember the passage we looked at last time from the end of Matthew 28? "Now," he says, "all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me and I have something for you to do, and I want you to teach others

everything that I'm telling you to do. You're to go into all the world and you're to preach the Gospel to every creature, and you're to make disciples from among all the nations." I mean, imagine, remember how Jesus had said to Peter, "Peter, I'm going to build my church through what I do in you," and he must have thought, "Yeah, tell me another one." Or if he didn't think it, the others would have thought it.

But now, you see, they'd begun to understand that actually what Jesus has been doing with them for three years has been preparing to send them to the ends of the earth to bring the good news of his death and resurrection, and as Luke says as he records Jesus' words in verse 47, "that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations." If some of these disciples had known more than they could possibly have known then, one of them might have put his hand up at the back of the class and said, "You mean we're to go to Columbia, South Carolina?" And think of the thrill that must have gone through them when they realized that instead of the end and defeat and hopelessness and what were they going to do now, this was actually the beginning of a glorious new adventure in which, as Jesus said, they were going to receive power from on high in order to be able to fulfill it.

So they understood the Gospel better, they now understood that this was not the end but the end of a new beginning, and then the third thing was this: now, as Jesus makes clear here, now they began to grasp the meaning of his promise that he would send them the Holy Spirit. Verse 48, "You are witnesses of these things. 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." He's going to send his Holy Spirit to them and the Holy Spirit is going to empower them and, God willing, next Wednesday we'll see how the Holy Spirit did empower them when he came as Jesus had promised.

But there was another dimension of this because Jesus had spoken to them on the night of his arrest a very great deal about the Holy Spirit. He had said to them, and you'll find this in John 16:7, he had said to them maybe the thing that most startled them, "It is to your advantage that I go away because if I don't go away, the Holy Spirit won't come to you." Now the way I try and get inside that is by asking myself or asking you, if we had the choice here, Wednesday 12:40, still time, if we had the choice not of which minister do you want to speak, but do you want Jesus here or do you want the Holy Spirit here, I think for most Christians that seems a bit of a no-brainer, doesn't it? And imagine Jesus at First Presbyterian Church, Columbia. You'd never forget it, would you? You would never forget the color of his eyes. You'd never forget what his hair was like, how he stood, what gesticulations he made, what kind of accent he had, and it just would be the greatest experience in all the world. But Jesus says, "Actually I've something better planned for you."

And of course, the thing is this: the Incarnate Jesus during his earthly ministry was fully and truly human and so he was never in two places at one time, so he couldn't be in First Presbyterian Church and First Baptist Church for the 11:45 sermon simultaneously, but what he's telling his disciples is that when he goes, he's going to send his Holy Spirit to his disciples, to those who trust him, and the Holy Spirit is actually, this is the mystery of

all mysteries in a way, the Holy Spirit is actually going to come and dwell in every single Christian believer, so that if we count up our number here today, 100 or 200 or whatever we are, and if we assume we're all Christians, there are not 200 Holy Spirits. There is only one Holy Spirit, so the same Holy Spirit would come and indwell Simon Peter, the same Holy Spirit would come and indwell Thomas, and the same Holy Spirit would come and indwell the Apostle John and that's what would make them brothers together, and that's what would enable them to live for the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ because, in a sense, he would be far nearer to them than he'd even been in the Upper Room, and so they began to realize that, yes, Jesus is actually going to go from us, but he's not going to desert us, he's going to send the very Holy Spirit who was on his life and ministry that we were able to see. "You know him," Jesus had said. "You know him. You have seen him in me and now he's going to come and indwell you." And no wonder they worshiped, no wonder they were full of joy.

And there's a fourth thing here, isn't there? Actually, Luke doesn't tell us here but he tells us at the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles that when this cloud came which, of course, some of them had seen this cloud before, Peter and John and James, they'd seen this cloud of glory surround them when they were on the mountain of transfiguration, and now it came again and Jesus disappeared from their sight and now forever. So why were they so full of joy? Well, do you remember what the angels who were there said to them as they were gazing into heaven? They said, "Stop gazing into heaven. You don't need to do that because this Jesus whom you have seen go into heaven is going to in a similar fashion come back from heaven, and then he is going to wind up all history, transform this broken universe, raise his people from the dead, and bring them together for all eternity." The glorious future reunion and I think that may have wonderfully turned their mourning into dancing, the fact that he was going to come again, that they would see him face-to-face, and then finally all of his promises would be fulfilled.

Now I wish there were more time. There isn't more time because you know there is something I have said absolutely nothing about but it's clear from the rest of the New Testament they began to understand: they began to understand what Jesus would be doing between this day of his ascent and the coming day of his descent. But that's your homework. What's Jesus doing now for his people? And maybe some future day that will be another series of Wednesdays. But first, have we grasped these things, friends? We understand that the Bible doesn't make sense apart from Jesus, that Jesus makes the Bible make sense, and Jesus makes it thrilling for us not to be able to see Jesus yet, and if we've grasped that, then wherever you're going, home or to shop or to the office or lie down because you're exhausted and it's been a hard day, at least inwardly even if you're scarcely able to do it outwardly, you can go home dancing because you know this Savior.

Let's pray together.

*Lord Jesus, thank you for the wonder of all that you have done for us. Thank you, too, that you've not left us in the dark but that you in your goodness worked in these apostles so that they would be able to write down everything that you had said and done, and help us to understand it as you led them into all the truth and sent them into all the world.*

*How privileged we are, but we do also pray that for each of us we may grasp who Jesus really is and be gripped by him and that as we read and hear the Bible, we may see the signs within it that point us to the faith and joy that these first Christians knew because of their trust in their Savior. Bless us the rest of this day, we pray, and make us a blessing to the people we meet and in the offices in which we work. We ask this in Jesus' name.  
Amen.*