

Scripture Readings and Sermon

May 24, 2020 by Rev. Mark Brechin

Commentary on Luke 24:36-39, 44-48 (Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#))

The Gospel of Luke ends with the physical encounter with Jesus in the upper room. Similar to the Gospel of John, Jesus begins by offering the disciples "Peace" and encouraging them to verify that he is not a ghost but is physically present. Going one step further than John, in Luke Jesus actually eats in their presence. Then Jesus, like on the road to Emmaus, "opened their minds to understand the scriptures" and it is this understanding of the entire faith tradition that the disciples are witnesses. Unlike John, the goal of Luke is not to address issues of doubt in the community but rather to establish the mission of the church as "witnesses". While in John, Jesus gives the Holy Spirit behind closed doors in the upper room, Luke has the gift of the Holy Spirit done as a witness to both the Jewish and Gentile communities at Pentecost. This gift, however, can not be given until Jesus ascends to the Father as stated in John 14:16-17. As the conclusion of the story of Jesus' life in the Gospel of Luke and the introduction to the work of the Holy Spirit in the church in the Book of Acts, the story of the ascension acts as a bridge between these two volumes which is generally considered one book by scholars.

Commentary on Acts 1:1-11 (Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#))

While Luke focuses on the life of Jesus Christ, the Book of Acts focuses on the life of the Holy Spirit who formed and sustained the church. The author is assumed to be Luke, Paul's physician and traveling companion, mentioned in Philemon 24, Colossians 4:14, and 2 Timothy 4:11. As in Luke 1:3, Acts is addressed to Theophilus. Theophilus is most likely not a name but a play off of the Jewish term for Gentiles who sympathized with Judaism (Theo=God; philus = loving friend). As the conclusion of the story of Jesus' life in the Gospel of Luke and the introduction to the work of the Holy Spirit in the church in the Book of Acts, the story of the ascension acts as a bridge between these two volumes which is generally considered one book by scholars. It is only because the early church wanted the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) to be read together that John was inserted between Luke and Acts. When woven together, Acts 1:3-8, Luke 24:44-50, Acts 1:9-11, and Luke 24:52-53 can be read together as the story of the ascension (note Luke 24:51 and Acts 1:9 describe the same event). That said, by emphasizing that Jesus was with them for "forty days", Acts not only places the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost but also provides a chronological distance from the Resurrection event. This distance provides a distinct break between the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts as stand alone books.

Commentary on Ephesians 1:15-23 (Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#))

This reading from Ephesians is paired with the ascension readings because of vs. 20, "seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places". For Paul, however, the verse has less to do with the ascension and more to do with the authority of Jesus as the Christ. Verses 20 thru 23 address the Lordship of Jesus over the church, the age to come, and over all creation. The emphasis on the Lordship of Jesus is a characteristic emphasis for Paul. The writer of Ephesians, typically attributed to Paul, picks up on themes typical of other Pauline letters. Within Paul's pattern of an introduction to one of his epistles is the inclusion of the Trinity found in verse 17 with the Father (of glory), the Son (our Lord Jesus Christ), and the Holy Spirit (spirit of wisdom and revelation). Paul then mentions the gifts of the Spirit, faith, hope, and love in verse 15 and 18. It is the Holy Spirit who "enlightens" our hearts to the blessings of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Sermon "What is Normal" ([Sermon Video](#))

As states begin to reopen, the question I hear repeated over and over is, "Will we ever be able to return to normal?". Living with this question, I have begun to wonder what 'normal' is. Growing up, normal was pay phones and a television that had five channels (if you were lucky). Music came from the radio and records and then 8 track tapes and cassettes. Cold War was normal until the Berlin Wall came down. Schools were safe until Columbine and the U.S. was untouchable until 9/11. The stock market was strong until 2008 and "other" people had to wear face masks until COVID-19. The world is always changes. It sometimes happens slowly or sometimes suddenly but the one thing that seems constant is change.

It is hard to imagine the massive change that occurred on the day of resurrection. As recorded in Luke 24, first the women report that Jesus is risen, then some men return from the road to Emmaus having seen Jesus, and finally Jesus appears in the upper room. Is it any wonder that they thought he was a ghost? People don't just die horrible deaths and then walk around three days latter. This was not normal! They desperately needed Jesus' gift of peace in a world turned upside down. Who needs that same peace today? In a world that seems to be always changing, can we still find firm footing in the certainty of the God who was, is, and will always be? This is why we always need preventient grace. It is so easy to be distracted by the chaos of the world and forget the never failing presence of God. Preventient grace is God constantly proclaiming peace in a world that is never normal.

Just when the disciples began to adjust to the presence of the resurrected Jesus, he ascends into heaven and once again there is a new normal. I have puzzled over the text, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." If someone says they will come back and then they drive down the street, is it not normal to expect them to come back on the same street? Jesus was just taken into heaven and the disciples are then chastised for looking up at heaven and told that Jesus will "come in the same way as you saw him go". The fact is that there was nothing normal about Jesus' ascension and there will be nothing normal about his return. Instead of wasting time trying to figure out what will happen, we are told to get on with what Jesus told us to do - witness. Even during abnormal times, Christians are called to witness through their love. Love transcends the chaos of the world and reminds us all that God's love is constant when everything else is changing.

This power of love is what Paul was praying for on behalf of the church in Ephesus. He prayed that the spirit of wisdom, God's Holy Spirit, might pour God's peace upon the church. That peace is experienced in a sense of hope for the future, an assurance of faith in the promises of God, and an overflowing awareness of the powerful might of God's love. These were all revealed in the life and teaching of Jesus and is now given to the church. Faith, hope, and love found and given by God in Christ Jesus is the Christian "normal". Stock markets may fall, wars may start, and diseases may spread but our hope and faith in God will never disappoint. The love of God could not be killed on a cross and can not be conquered by anything in all of creation. This normal will never change. Technologies, nations, and even churches come and go but God is always there. May you know His peace today. May you experience the mystery of his loving presence today. And may you face the uncertainty of life with the gifts of faith, hope, and love.