

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Walking Witnesses: The Lurch”

Dr. Jay Howell

Luke 24:44-48

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Next week we'll wrap up this series “Walking Witnesses,” our look at the resurrection stories at the end of Luke's Gospel. But first a word on what we'll be going into next.

If you talk much at all about what it means to follow Christ and how Scripture talks about being his disciple, then you don't get too far before you hit the reality that truly doing so will inevitably mean not feeling fully welcome, wherever you might be. At best, you'll be thought of as weird. At worst, your very lives and livelihoods will be threatened for Jesus' sake.

This is not a new thing, in fact the notion of following God in a setting in which you're not entirely welcome is something that comes up often in Scripture, even in the Old Testament, and it can have a name attached to it: exile. Specifically, that's a reference to the people of Israel's becoming exiled from their homeland and figuring out what it means to be a displaced covenant people, but more broadly it's about what it means to follow God when doing so isn't entirely embraced in the culture at large.

We'll be looking at one book that has “exile” written all over it, and what it means for us in following God today: the Book of Daniel.

In a way, that notion of being in a bit of limbo kind of ties into what we'll look at today in Luke's Gospel: Christ's giving a mission to his church, but then what? Let's go to God's Word together.

⁴⁴ 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, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.’ ⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶ and he said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. Luke 24:44-48

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me?

O Lord our God, we bless you and thank you for the mission you have given us, for the good news you have empowered us to take forward, for the ministry of reconciliation you have

entrusted to us, for the kingdom you have called us to proclaim. We confess that the task before us is daunting, and left to our own devices impossible. Be with us we pray, and for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Some time ago, a congregation was putting on an Easter pageant. They had done a good job. This wasn't a Broadway production or anything, just a local congregation, but they had done a good job of it. They had gotten through the tough stuff: depictions of Christ's betrayal, and the beatings and the torture, and then through the crucifixion and the burial too. On, then, to the triumphant celebration of Christ's resurrection, coming out of the tomb, appearing to his disciples.

And then, at the end of the pageant, Jesus would ascend into heaven. And the church actually put the guy playing Jesus on wires and lifted him up so that he appeared to be ascending. Pretty striking, really. All of this was captured on grainy video, really in what became one of those early viral church videos. With jubilant music and a singing choir and a group of people portraying Christ's disciples holding their hands up in the air toward their ascendant Messiah, Jesus himself was being lifted up higher and higher into the air, all with a flowing white robe and dramatic lighting.

Unfortunately, because this wasn't quite a Broadway production, the wires on the guy weren't perfectly balanced, so as the guy was being lifted higher and higher in his flowing white robe, he started to turn, slowly. And like an unstoppable train moving very slowly, everyone could see what was about to happen, but there was nothing anyone could do about it. Jesus slowly turned in the sky, until his back was facing the congregation. And the flowing white robe had flowed and been turned in such a way that the man's choice in underwear that day was fully visible.

Some of the disciples on the floor below managed to stay in character, but others recoiled at the sight, perhaps not sending quite the message that was intended by the good news of the day.

That, for a long time, was for me the most enduring visualization of the Ascension Day. It is perhaps the most under-observed, under-appreciated day in the church calendar each year. Just out of curiosity, I wonder how many actually knew that last Thursday was Ascension Day. We've actually got a pretty exact marker for it in Scripture. Forty days after he rose from the dead, but we, like many others, don't do much to celebrate it. We, like many churches, don't typically do anything for the actual Ascension Day, but instead roll it into the following Sunday, calling that, which is today in fact, Ascension Sunday. But even then, how many of us have Ascension Sunday circled on our calendars in the same vein as Easter or Christmas?

And I'm not necessarily knocking the practice. Honestly, it can get a bit tiresome to feel like you have to focus on every minor festive day whenever it comes around, to the point that it

can feel like that's all you do. But nevertheless, there's something I fear we do miss without a deeper understanding of the Ascension, and not just what happened, but what it *means* for us.

The passage we read talks about what it means to us. It comes on the heels of his appearance to his disciples back in Jerusalem, just before his actual ascension into heaven. (Ben will walk us through that next week, as well as the amazing promise that comes with it.) But here, Jesus kind of drops some hard truth on them.

First in a similar way as he had done on the road to Emmaus with the two disciples, he opens their minds to the Scriptures, it says, and how all of Scripture points to the Messiah suffering, dying, and rising again. Then he says that this message of repentance and forgiveness must be proclaimed to all nations, beginning right there in Jerusalem.

And if you're the disciples, granted, you're still getting over being spooked that Jesus is with you again in the first place, but if you're the disciples, you're thinking, "Awesome! Jesus is back. All you folks who thought you had him down, you done messed up now. Now he's going on a victory tour, proclaiming this good news, and like he just said, he's going everywhere with it. To all nations, starting right here. Nothing's gonna stop him now."

And then he drops something you weren't expecting. "You are witnesses of these things." And you think, well sure but why would that matter? Why would it matter that we were witnesses of these things? You got the real thing right here. No need for witnesses. You got living, breathing proof. (And by the way, the word here for witnesses is the same word we get the word "martyr" from, so you might also be thinking, well that seems a bit excessive.)

But then reality starts to set in. What if Jesus wasn't going to be with you forever? What happens to this mission, this message of repentance and forgiveness that must be proclaimed to all nations? Just who exactly is going to do that?

That, friends, is part of the importance of a day like the Ascension, because it at once recognizes the plain truth in the claim that Christ is alive, yet is not physically with us, looks ahead in hope to the day when he returns, and at the same time turns the spotlight on the present state of things: that Christ did not leave those who follow him just with instructions to wait, but with a message and a mission, and a daunting one at that.

All of sudden, those words that Christ taught about the kingdom of heaven, about the message of repentance and forgiveness, or other ways that Scripture talks about it: of making disciples, as Christ tells us in the Gospel of Matthew, of demonstrating the love of God through our love for each other, as he says in the Gospel of John, or the ministry of reconciliation, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians—no matter which way you slice it, those lofty, seemingly impossible tasks that maybe as a disciple at the time you might've thought, hey Jesus is going to lead the way in

this; he'll be right by our side. But now that he's leaving again, wait a minute, is that supposed to be us that's doing all those things?

It can start to be overwhelming, to say the least, to think that Christ, the Son of God, the Alpha and the Omega, redeemer of the world, has accomplished this cosmic task of conquering death and ushering in a new reality and, now, is entrusting the continuation of that mission to you.

What are we supposed to do with that? Feels like we're being left in the lurch, as if we were trying to stand in for Jesus like in that Easter pageant, only to get turned around revealing that we really don't belong in that spot. You ever heard of "impostor syndrome," where you're in a place of responsibility or authority but don't feel at all qualified to do it? That's kind of what this feels like, doesn't it? Is this what it means to be a witness?

But if it feels overwhelming, Christ never meant for us to be alone. First, he's sending help—and that's what Ben will talk about next week. But he also says, "You" as in "You, plural," as in "Y'all, together" are witnesses. This was never meant to be a solo mission.

In that vein, Ascension Sunday is a pretty appropriate day to ordain and install new officers. If you've seen it a lot of times, maybe it feels kind of procedural, as in, "Okay, here's the next class of elders and deacons. Yes, to all the questions." But maybe if you've seen it happen so much we can miss what it signifies: that these are signs of the church continuing its mission, discerning whom God has lifted up for leadership, as we together seek to be witnesses of this good news of repentance and forgiveness, that must be proclaimed to all the nations.

So friends, be encouraged this day, for Christ has not left us in the lurch. He has given us quite the task, a daunting one, an impossible one—impossible at least if we were to try it on our own. But he has also given hope: hope that he is coming back, and hope that even in this impossible task set before us, we are not alone in doing so.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.