

The Ascension of Our Lord Sermon, May 24, 2020
Happy Endings, Luke 24:44-53

If you like books or movies, you know that one of the most important parts of a good story or film is the ending. What happens to the characters? Do they live happily ever after? Is there a tragic ending? Most people like happy endings.

On Ascension Day, we celebrate a happy ending to the mission of Jesus 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.” So today, we celebrate the Ascension of our Lord. Jesus had willingly come down to earth as a little human baby. It took more than thirty years to earn our liberty. 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. We read in verses 44 & 45, “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”.

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). Nations honor returning heroes with parades. 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! But the disciples weren’t so ready for the words “The End.” As happy as they were to see Jesus’ triumph, they were also bewildered about losing him as their leader.

The challenge for Jesus was to show 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 said to 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”.

Christ’s mission to liberate the world was complete in one way. “It is finished,” Jesus said from the cross. 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. “You will be my witnesses . . . to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

It is through the sharing of God’s 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 not "you are observers," but "you are witnesses." 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 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 clearly, we cannot do it without his help. Jesus says in Matthew 28:20, "I will be with you always, to the very end of the age". 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 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. 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 will give us the words we need to say. Through his Word, he empowers us to do what he asks us to do.

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: They received the power of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. 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.

Do you like happy endings? With movies, writers and the director decide how it ends. But in real life, God allows us to help write the end of stories. 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. Amen.

May the peace of God which surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.