



## LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

### Great Joy

#### Luke 24:36-53

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Luke ends his Gospel by telling us that, after seeing the risen Jesus, the disciples returned to Jerusalem with “great joy”. He brings us full circle. Near the beginning he writes about the angels visiting the shepherds outside Bethlehem. On that first Christmas night the glory of the angels frightened those poor shepherds, but the angel announced: “Do not be afraid, for I bring you good news of *great joy* for all the people.” Now, here at the end of the story as we’ve been reading these last two Sundays, we see the disciples full of fear, anxiety, frustration, anger, and confusion. They found the empty tomb, but they didn’t understand. They heard the announcement of the angels that Jesus has risen from the dead. Again, they didn’t understand. They thought they understood God’s plan, but like the rest of Israel, they’d had much of it wrong all along and Jesus and his resurrection didn’t fit their misconceptions. Even with all the evidence, even with all of Jesus’ teaching, they failed to understand.

And so Jesus appeared to Cleopas and his companion on the road to Emmaus. They’d given up. They were hopeless. They were going home to pickup where they’d left off when they had decided to follow Jesus. But all the way there Jesus explained the Scriptures to them. They had failed to understand because they had never put Jesus in the centre of them. But now Jesus shows them how he’s the beginning, the centre, and the end of Israel’s story. He shows them himself all the way from Genesis through the Prophets. And Luke says that then, finally, the light dawned on them. They started to

understand what had happened. They still hadn’t recognised Jesus himself, but they invited this stranger home for dinner and as he broke bread with them their eyes were opened. They realised that the man who had been with them on the road, the man explaining how Jesus was at the centre of the story of Israel that they knew so well, he was really Jesus risen from the dead. And then he vanished. Just as they were thinking they’d figured everything out Jesus miraculously disappeared! That had to have thrown them for quite a loop. And yet they got up then and there and hurried back to Jerusalem, even though it meant travelling on the dark road at night. When they got to Jerusalem they discovered that Jesus had appeared there as well—this time to Peter.

Imagine the excited discussion they had then. They had now all seen Jesus. They all knew he really was alive. What did it mean? And Cleopas could have then launched into an exposition of the Scriptures, showing the others what Jesus has shown him: how Jesus was at the centre of Israel’s story all along, how the Scriptures reveal that he would conquer the enemies of God and of God’s people not with military might, but by being rejected by them and then suffering and dying at their hands. “Remember,” he could say, “when Jesus told us about dying and rising on the third day. We didn’t understand, but all the time it was right there in the Scriptures. We just hadn’t understood them correctly.” And now they wonder: What’s with Jesus being there in the flesh, eating bread, but then suddenly vanishing? What does that mean? This is where we pickup the final part of Luke’s story in 24:36.

**As they were talking about these things, Jesus himself stood among them, and said to them, “Peace to you!”**

As he had suddenly vanished, Jesus now just as suddenly reappears. And he announced himself, he greets them with that familiar greeting: “Peace to

you!” “Peace” was the usual greeting in semitic cultures and it still is, whether it’s the *Shalom* of Jews or the *Salam* of Arabs. It’s a wish of wholeness and well-being and in Luke’s Gospel it always has connotations of salvation—of the wholeness, well-being, and restoration that Jesus brings. When Jesus spoke “Peace” to his friends that common greeting had never been so full of meaning. Luke goes on in verse 37:

**But they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit.**

Understanding still hasn’t fully dawned on them. Jesus is alive, but they still don’t understand exactly how. Again, they knew all about the idea of the resurrection of the dead. They believed in the resurrection of the dead and even had hope in the day it would happen, but the idea that just one person—like Jesus—would be raised before everyone else and that the world would seemingly go on as it had been, well, that simply didn’t fit. And so Jesus, suddenly appearing, startles and frightens them. Luke says that they thought they were seeing a spirit. Again, they knew resurrection meant a restoration of the *physical* body to life, but they believed it would happen to everyone all at once at the end of the age. It wouldn’t happen to just one person. So, yes, they think, Jesus is “alive”—after a fashion—and they can believe that—but he can’t be really *alive* alive, which would mean that what they’re seeing is a spirit, a ghost and that leaves them spooked, so to speak.

Jesus asks them:

**“Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?” (Luke 24:38)**

Of course he knows. He understands why they’re frightened. He knows why, despite the empty tomb and seeing him in person, they have their doubts about all of this. And so he also knows exactly what he needs to

do to dispel their fear and their doubts and their confusion. Look at what he does.

**“See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. (Luke 24:39-40)**

Jesus invites them to touch him. A spirit, a ghost doesn't have flesh and bones, but—and they'll see this if they only touch him—Jesus is most definitely solid. He has warm flesh and they can feel the bones and muscle underneath. He's not a ghost risen from *sheol* to haunt them. No, he really has been resurrected from the dead. And it really is Jesus. He shows them his hands and feet, still somehow showing the evidence of the nails that held him to the cross. Luke describes their response, saying that:

**[T]hey still disbelieved for joy and were marveling... (Luke 24:41a)**

It's not that they didn't believe, but if we look at other places this sort of phrase is used, the sense is that they were paralysed by their amazement—sort of frozen in their tracks. Based on the early reports from Cleopas and Peter hope had returned and they were joyful, but they didn't fully understand what it all meant. Now, having been able to touch Jesus the fully reality of the situation is sinking in and they just don't know how to respond. They're dumbfounded. Jesus had promised some wonderful and amazing things, he had even done some wonderful and amazing things as he preached God's restoration of Creation, but here for the first time the disciples are able to see—and *to touch!*—the very first part of that new Creation. This is something still in the future, but here's a foretaste of it. What's the new Creation going to be like? It's hard to say, but somehow it's going to be like Jesus: flesh and blood and *more*—as I said last week, as at home in heaven as

on earth and at home on earth as in heaven.

I think of when our house was built. It took six months to build it, but even before they started we'd been waiting several months. We only had an image in our heads of what it would be like when it was finished, but we had bits and pieces we could hold in our hands. We'd been in similar houses built by the builder, we had a copy of the original plan—although we'd made changes to it—and we had samples we picked out of the paint, the carpet, the wood flooring, the cabinets, the moulding. Even though we couldn't picture exactly what the finished house would look like, all these small pieces gave us an idea—something to look forward to and something to hope for. Jesus does something similar for the disciples here. They won't fully understand resurrection until they've experienced it themselves and they won't fully understand the nature of God's restored Creation until it has been made fully new, but here as they talk and laugh with the resurrected Jesus, as they touch his hands and feet, they get a foretaste and it leaves them standing speechless.

And Luke goes on. Imagine the disciples just standing there, mouths agape and Jesus asks:

**“Have you anything here to eat?” (Luke 24:41b)**

“Guys, I'm hungry. Do you have anything to eat?” Jesus certainly had a sense of humour! Luke says:

**They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate before them. (Luke 24:42-43)**

He ate the fish, but there's more to it. Again, they at first thought Jesus was a ghost. Ghosts don't get hungry and ghosts don't eat. And so he sat there eating that piece of fish while they watched in awe. In that simple act

Jesus gave them a glimpse into a whole new world. I was thinking about this during the last week. As an Advent discipline some friends and I are copying out the book of Revelation. At the beginning of Chapter 4, John writes that he saw a door open in heaven—a door, a portal, a gateway—and I suspect it was a great and royal gateway—opened to give him, stuck there in exile on the island of Patmos, a glimpse into heaven, into the realm of God. Through that “door”, John received a glimpse of God's throne, of the multitude gathered to worship him, and as the great scroll was opened, he got a glimpse of God's plan to rescue his creation and, finally, to restore earth and heaven, to make all things new that humanity and God might once again live together. That vision gave John, and it gave the churches with whom he shared it, hope to endure suffering and persecution. It gave them a foretaste of a new world, of redemption, of resurrection, and of communion with God. And in this simple act of eating a boiled fish as his friends watch, Jesus opens a door and gives them a similar glimpse of the future. In simply eating that fish, Jesus gives them hope. This is what the resurrection of the dead looks like. Not only that, but as it has happened to Jesus, it will one day happen to all who find their life in him.

In verses 44-46 Jesus goes on. He does for the whole group of them what he did for Cleopas on the road to Emmaus:

**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.” Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead...”**

Jesus shows how he is the beginning, the centre, and the end of the Scriptures. He shows them how the Scriptures all along pointed not to a Messiah who would come to fulfil Israel's political ambitions, but who would come to suffer, to be rejected, and to die for the sake of both Israel and her enemies. And he shows them how—all along and right under their noses—the Scriptures told that he would rise from death on the third day. Now they finally begin to understand. But now, with them all gathered there, Jesus takes things further: he explains the implications of all this. It's important that they understand who Jesus is and that he died and rose again, but now he explains what it *means for them*, and this is, I think, where we need to listen closely. Every Sunday we recite together the words of the Nicene Creed, affirming that Jesus died and rose again. If you pray the Daily Office, you affirm these same doctrines each day in the Apostles' Creed. It's important we believe and understand that Jesus died and rose again. But, Brothers and Sisters, these events are a foundation on which Jesus now calls us to build—to do the work of his Church. *If we believe that Jesus died and rose again, that belief must translate into action.* Look at verse 47. It is written that the Christ—the Messiah—suffer and on the third rise again...

**...and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.**  
(Luke 24:47-48)

Follow Jesus here. He begins by walking them through what we know of as the Old Testament—Israel's story—to show them how he is everywhere in it and how his coming, his death, and his resurrection are the climax of that story. In Jesus, Israel's story—the story that began with God's call to Abraham—is finally fulfilled. In a world lost in darkness, God called

Abraham, and through him he called Israel, to be a representative of the nations, to restore knowledge of God to the world, and to suffer for the world's sins. Israel failed. Instead of reaching out to the nations with God's light, she instead kept the light to herself and prayed for the day when the nations would be judge and destroyed. But Jesus came and fulfilled that failed mission. He took faithless Israel's punishment on himself when he died the death reserved for violent revolutionaries and through his rejection, through his suffering, through his death, and through his resurrection he has conquered sin and death and inaugurated God's new Creation. But that means now that as Jesus embodies Israel and has taken up her mission to bring salvation and restoration to the nations, all those who are in him are called to take part in that mission. All those who have repented, giving up everything in order to reorient their lives in and around Jesus are now called to proclaim the coming of the kingdom. Brothers and Sisters, we—you and I—are now given the task of calling the world to repentance, of calling the world to give up everything in order to take hold of Jesus that sin be forgiven and replaced with life. As he preached good news to the poor, healing to the sick, sight to the blind, release to the captives we are now called to carry on that ministry, of making the kingdom known, of ourselves opening a door into heaven that the world might catch a glimpse of the resurrection, the restoration, the all-things-made-new in which we hope.

The problem is that we Christians have often tended to water down this calling. We often spiritualise the kingdom—as if Jesus' "spirit" had been "raised", but his body left in the tomb, as if he'd never invited his disciples to touch his hands and feet, as if he'd never broken bread or eaten fish with them. We act as if Jesus was nothing more than a spirit or a ghost

that first Easter. We dilute the doctrines of the resurrection and the new Creation and shortchange ourselves. We start thinking like ancient Greeks rather than ancient Hebrews—that this world and these bodies are bad and that our hope is to be freed of them, to live as disembodied spirits in a heaven far from earth. And that theology of escape impacts the way we see the world and our place in it—the way we see our calling and ministry. We tend to think of repentance and forgiveness of sins primarily in personal terms. When we think about evangelism we think of it in terms of rescuing souls from earth to live join us someday in that far away heaven. Our thinking begins to subtly shift and the Church begins to disengage from the world around her. Forget the earth: it's just going to be burned up some day. Forget human institutions: Soon Jesus will zap us out of them. And before long we're thinking like the Jews of Jesus' day: forgetting that we are the New Israel, called to make God known to the nations, to make his kingdom known, to bring transformation to people and nations here and now, to relationships and to society here and now.

Consider the image of Jesus we have in the Gospels and specifically the portrayal Luke has shown us. Jesus came not to condemn, but to redeem. Humanity already stood condemned. Heaping more condemnation on us won't save us. Jesus came to the outsiders, to the unclean, to the rejected, to the sinners—to the people who are an offense to God because of their rebellious hearts—but instead of condemning, instead of reviling, he welcomed and embraced them, giving healing, cleanness, release, forgiveness—and ultimately a new and transformed life. He gave life where there was death. He made new what had been corrupted by sin and death. Now, Brothers and Sisters, we need to ask ourselves what our lives

and our ministry look like as Jesus' Church. How do we respond to outsiders, to the unclean, to sinners—even to those who revile and persecute us? If we live in fear of them, if we live in hate, if our response to them is to judge and condemn rather than to embrace, heal, make whole, speak peace, to forgive, to redeem, then we are *not* living the mission and ministry Jesus has given us.

The mission Jesus has given us is not an easy one. We all struggle with it. It runs against our sinful nature, but that's just it. Jesus has redeemed us, he's given us life, he's freed us from the bondage of sin and death, and he has given us his Spirit to strengthen and to equip us to do what he's called us to do. Look again at Luke. 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)

This is the story picked up in the book of Acts. There we read the story of what happens when the Church, empowered by the Holy Spirit, takes Jesus' mission to the world. It's an impossible mission in which Jesus calls us to give up everything. In Acts we see men and women even giving up their lives for the sake of Jesus, but it is all made possible by the Spirit, promised by the Father to the Prophets; the Spirit whom Jesus poured out at Pentecost and whom he has poured out on each of us in our own baptisms. With forgiveness of sins always comes new life, with the forgiveness of sins always comes restoration to God. In the here and now, this side of the New Creation, it is the Spirit who indwells us, giving us a foretaste of that communion with God and the life of the resurrection.

And then the final scene in this final act is given in verses 50-53:

**Then he led them 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. And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God.**

Luke reminds us that we are the agents of God's kingdom. If we go back to the beginning of the story, to Genesis, this was the task that God had given to Adam in the beginning: to rule the earth and to have dominion over it. Humanity was called to manage the garden, the Lord's temple, and that temple-garden would have been ever-expanding had humanity been fruitful and multiplied and not rebelled against God. In Jesus a new humanity has now been created. Jesus has ascended to his throne, to rule as sovereign, and one day to return when all his enemies have been put under his feet. But until that day we—you and I and all who are in Christ—are made agents of the new Creation, with the task of proclaiming that Jesus is Lord, that God is King, calling the world to repentance and making known that in Jesus and in his kingdom forgiveness and new life are to be found. We are called to be agents of righteousness and justice, of mercy and grace, of love and hope—light in the darkness. We are called to transform the world by manifesting the kingdom in real and practical ways.

Brothers and Sisters, again it is no easy task, and yet in it Jesus offers “great joy”. This was the message and the promise of the angels. And it's a message not simply for you and for me, but a message, as they declared to the shepherds, for *all the people*. In Jesus, through his death and resurrection, there is forgiveness and release from our bondage to sin and death. Isaiah foretold a day when “the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea” (11:9). Jesus has made it our great joy

and our great privilege to be part of his work of making that knowledge of the Lord known in all the earth.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, fill our hearts with joy, we pray. Fill our hearts with joy in your Son, in your kingdom, in your salvation, in your new Creation—as we hear about them in your word and as we receive a foretaste of these things at your Table, and as we go out to serve each other and to serve the world in the name of Jesus. Give us grace and teach us to find our hope in Jesus, teach us to live in “great joy”, and cause that joy to overflow from us as seek to show your justice and mercy, your mercy and grace, your love and your peace in practical ways that manifest your kingdom here and now. Through Jesus our Lord we ask this. Amen.