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**The Gospel of Luke**  
**LXXII. The Ascension**  
**Luke 24:36-53**

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Here we are at the end of the Gospel of Luke. 72 weeks, we've spent at the feet of Jesus, hearing the story as Luke tells it. But here at the end, Luke brings us back to the same place where we started. This morning's text ends with the disciples returning to the temple to bless God. You'll remember way back in Luke chapter 1, we met a man named Zechariah, a priest offering incense in the temple of the Lord. And while he was there, just to the right of the altar of incense, the angel of the Lord suddenly appeared to him.<sup>1</sup> God's presence in the temple, meeting Zechariah.

The Temple of the Lord. Perhaps that's a fitting place for Luke to end it, since the Temple is the place where, according to Jewish tradition, God showed up for his people. It was certainly true for Zechariah. God did meet him there. But was it true for the disciples? Where would they meet God? And is it true for us? If we want to meet God, where can we find him?

Now, that's an interesting question. Where can we find God? What makes it even more interesting is to ask it in the context of the ascension story that we just read. What does it mean for us if Jesus isn't here? Didn't Luke just tell us that Jesus ascended into heaven? It's right there in the text. It says "he parted from them and was carried up into heaven."<sup>2</sup> Doesn't that obviously mean that Jesus is, by definition, not with us? When all of this started, Jesus was in heaven, then he came down as a baby. He did what he needed to do. Then he went back up to heaven. End of story. Jesus is back in heaven, the disciples are back in the temple. Everything is as it was. Put the pieces back in the box and we can all go home.

But is that really all there is to the story? What is the ascension of Jesus all about? Why did he part from the disciples?

There's another scene from scripture that gives us a clue. It's the story of Elijah and Elisha, and the disciples would have known it. You'll remember how Elisha longed for the presence of his master. When Elijah urges his student to remain behind, Elisha's response is, "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you."<sup>3</sup> He doesn't want to be parted from his master, his teacher, his friend. But when Elijah and Elisha cross into the promised land, Elijah's time finally comes for him to go. And as he is carried off by chariots of fire into heaven. But what becomes of Elisha, his student? Is he left alone? No! The scripture says Elisha received

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 1:11

<sup>2</sup> Luke 24:51

<sup>3</sup> 2 Kings 2:4

a double portion of Elijah's spirit. The people say, "The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha."<sup>4</sup> Elisha was not parted from his master; no, they became forever powerfully united by Elijah's spirit. Which is, of course, God's Spirit.

But this is merely a type and shadow of what was to come in Jesus. What does it mean for the disciples of Jesus and for us that he has ascended? We can imagine that surely, they did not want him to go. But were they truly parted from him? In his letter to the church in Ephesus, Paul puts it this way. He says,

*"When he ascended on high he led a host of captives,  
and he gave gifts to men."*

*(In saying, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.)<sup>5</sup>*

In his ascension, Jesus Christ fills all things. His ascension, we should understand, is not a movement away from creation, but, almost paradoxically, a movement toward it. One preacher says, "He has to get that high in order to take his place on the ground everywhere."<sup>6</sup> He's not putting distance between himself and us, he's actually getting closer to each one of us. Like the sun, he's rising to shine his light over all the earth. In other words, we don't have to go to the temple any more because God is now present, in Jesus Christ, everywhere we are. In John's Revelation, he sees a vision of the New Jerusalem, and he says, "I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb."<sup>7</sup> This is the promise of the new creation into which Jesus was raised. And so the question is not, "where can we find God," but, rather, "where does God meet us?" And the answer, my friends, is that God meets us everywhere.

But how? How does he do this? "He who descended is the one who also ascended far above the heavens, that he might fill all things." The early Reformers wrestled with this question quite a bit. What does it mean for Jesus Christ to fill all things? What does it mean for Christ to be with us even now? Martin Luther, in his theology of the Lord's Supper, said that what it means for Christ to truly fill all things is just what it sounds like. Jesus is present everywhere. Even, according to Luther, in your pea soup.<sup>8</sup>

John Calvin disagreed. He argued instead that because Jesus ascended bodily to the right hand of the Father, he was not available to be present in your pea soup. His presence was made real through the power of the Holy Spirit, which lifts the church mysteriously into the presence of Christ. How then, according to Calvin, does Christ meet you? His answer is: through the Church.

But all this talk of the real presence of Christ can quickly make your eyes glaze over if you're not careful. They're great questions, don't get me wrong. But they're not exactly important questions. Faith ceases to be faith when we attempt to prove it. When we get so caught

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<sup>4</sup> 2 Kings 2:15

<sup>5</sup> Ephesians 4:8-10

<sup>6</sup> (Mertins, 2023)

<sup>7</sup> Revelation 21:22-23

<sup>8</sup> (Byassee, 2020)

up in the mechanics of faith, we run the risk of forsaking the mystery of faith. And the mystery of faith proclaims the truth of Christ's presence without explaining how. One preacher says, "the gospel does its best work not by force but by fascination."<sup>9</sup> The gospel is not meant to convince our minds as much as it is meant to captivate our hearts. As the hymn beautifully testifies, "faith believes, nor questions how."<sup>10</sup>

Regardless of how, we know that Christ meets us right here and right now in the power of his Spirit. Jesus came to his disciples while they were talking. In other words, in the midst of daily life. "Peace to you," he said. In Luke's second volume, the book of Acts, Luke gives us more details of their conversation. Just before he ascends, the disciples ask him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?"<sup>11</sup>

Seriously? What kind of question is that? Clearly, they still don't understand. After all that they've seen and heard from Jesus, they still don't get it. Lord, are you going to do it now? That whole death and resurrection thing was just a hiccup in the plan, right? Now you can get down to business and raise an army to overthrow the Roman government, right? We've got big plans for you, Jesus. Are you going to do it now? Where's your power, Jesus? Are you going to show them yet?

How vast is the mercy of God. Jesus doesn't become angry with them. He doesn't even rebuke them. He is Emmanuel, God with us, meaning, he understands. He understands their misunderstanding. He knows that their lives were consumed by another power: Caesar's power. And his power was everywhere. They saw it in the face of Caesar's coins, and they felt it at the tip of his spear. He was ever present. Caesar was Lord, not Jesus. If you didn't believe it then you were a fool because the proof was all around you. Caesar met them everywhere they went. It would really be nice if Jesus would just snap his fingers and take Caesar away. That's the kind of power they wanted out of Jesus. That's the kind of power we want out of Jesus.

We want him to snap his fingers and take all our troubles away. But of course, that's not who Jesus is. Jesus comes not to take our troubles away, but to be with us through them. To meet us in the midst of our trouble. To take those troubles upon himself so that we don't have to bear them alone. Jesus, God with us.

No, rather than anger or rebuke, he offers them himself; an act of mercy made real in his own body.

"See my hands and my feet," he says. "See that it is I myself. Touch me and see..." Those hands and feet... still pierced... still bloodied and broken for our sake. Isaiah 52:

How beautiful upon the mountains  
are the feet of him who brings good news...<sup>12</sup>

In the midst of their trouble, Jesus met them. Right where they were, he met them. In the same way, he meets us. Scripture says, "he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> (Byassee, 2020)

<sup>10</sup> (Dix, 2013)

<sup>11</sup> Acts 1:6

<sup>12</sup> Isaiah 52:7

<sup>13</sup> Luke 24:45

Not by proof, but by mystery. He opened their minds by the gift of faith, that they might finally understand. It is not Caesar who reigns, but Jesus Christ. The seeming Lordship of our present troubles fades away. The Lordship of Christ is forever, and he will never leave us alone.

Revelation 21:

*And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. <sup>4</sup>He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."*

*<sup>5</sup>And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new."<sup>14</sup>*

And then he raised his wounded hands, his hands pierced through by nails; These hands he raised to bless them; to enfold them in the power of his great love. And as he blessed them he was carried up into heaven to take his place at his Father's right hand, ascended to fill all things. Thanks be to God.

## References

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<sup>14</sup> Revelation 21:3-5