

Luke 24:44-53. He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." ⁴⁵Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. ⁴⁶He told them, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. ⁴⁸You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." ⁵⁰When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. ⁵¹While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. ⁵²Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. ⁵³And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.

They had learned a lot together and now it was time for another important and lasting lesson. Over the last few weeks and months and years, we too have once again reviewed the goodness of God and how Jesus fulfilled his promises. Around Christmastime, we walked through the high points of gospel goodness as spoke of how Jesus comes near to us and together we welcomed Christ the newborn king. In the Epiphany season, we watched him grow into the Savior that we needed, he stepped forward with the Father's blessing as the Lamb of God who would take away our sins and take on Satan for us. First in the wilderness he battled our foe and then he went out and established his kingdom and set people from the power of the devil through the proclamation of his holy word. With miracles and wonders and signs, but most importantly with the power of his Word, Jesus changed hearts and lives and won souls for the kingdom. And then we watched in those crucial hours of Lent as Jesus willingly went to his passion to procure our salvation. We watched and listened as his disciples faltered and failed, but he was perfectly unflinching, as he defeated sin and death and hell through his death and resurrection. And now as he hands the keys of the kingdom off to those same disciples, we are reminded of the forgiveness that he gave to them that they were to go out and share. The risen and ascended Lord forgave his disciples, restored them, and assured them with his words and presence that he had died for their sins, and not only for theirs but for the sins of the world. And now the Lord Jesus who so graciously forgave and restored his disciples, would encourage them and equip them so that they could go out with the message of reconciliation that was for the whole world. That good news of the risen and victorious king, the good news of sinners reconciled to a holy God, had to go out to nations.

With this, some big changes were coming for the disciples. Jesus was going back into heaven. The disciples were going to be on their own, and they were given this momentous task to continue to spread and grow Christ's kingdom to the entire world. Many of these disciples would even leave their homeland and they would travel far and wide to new and distant lands. But before they set out on this global mission to share the gospel with the

nations, Jesus blessed them and prepared them for their journey. For Jesus the **risen and ascended Lord encourages his disciples** with a

1. A renewal of his promise 2. A blessing to remember 3. And an opportunity to spend a little more time together in worship of their living Lord.

As we face some big changes that are coming in our personal lives and our local congregations, this portion of Scripture is a good place to look for some lessons of encouragement as we prepare for what's next. So let us pause and take in this special scene.

As Jesus prepares to depart and ascend back into heaven, Jesus of course, wants his disciples to remember what he had taught them. And so he renews his disciples by means of his powerful word. ***When I was still with you***, with these words Jesus encourages his disciples to remember he taught them as they walked together, to remember what they learned as they sat his feet. He wanted them to remember the Scriptures and how they were fulfilled by the one that God had always promised, and that he was that promised Messiah. The disciples were to remember that these Scriptures were all about Jesus and they were to go back to these God given words for ongoing strength and comfort and encouragement. ***"This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."*** And then Luke tells us that, ***"he opened their minds to so they could understand the Scriptures"***. We pray that the Lord would do the same sort of thing for us. Even though many of us have spent a good amount of time with Jesus, that is: coming to church, reading personal devotions, day after day, week after week, year after year, there are plenty of things that we still struggle to understand or apply to our lives. While many of us are familiar with the Bible and the teachings of Jesus there will always be things that we have a hard time really letting them sink in and take hold in our lives. Some things kind run in one ear and out the other, or they sort of roll around on the surface and slide off as we have a hard time properly and continually applying God's Word to our changing situations. Jesus tells us, ***"Do not worry, do not doubt but believe"***, and instead we hold on to worry and doubt. He tells us to love our enemies and to forgive and love as he has loved us, and in our sinfulness, we have a hard time really letting those lessons sink in. He tells us to put away anger and to let our yes, be yes, but we have a hard time with misusing his name. On the other hand, he tells us to use his name properly as we are to proclaim his name and share the good news of Jesus with the next generation, to our neighbors and friends, so that others near and far may know the forgiveness and joy that he has given to us, but we have a hard time moving forward on those encouragements and commands. We hear them, we know them, but often such lessons remain standing on the surface and we kind of slide them off to the side or over on to someone else's plate – we do this to the detriment of our faith and to detriment of those around us. And so like the disciples we too are called to repentance and in Jesus we forgiven and restored to live for our gracious Savior and serve him. Therefore, we are daily led to praise our God for the very same message of repentance and forgiveness of sins that Jesus insisted that his disciples would take to the world. Thus, many miles and many years removed from that hill outside of Bethany, we praise our Lord with repentant and grateful hearts for his enduring grace that still reaches out to us.

Through God's gift of faith, we look to Jesus and pray, ***"Risen and ascended Lord, open up our hearts!"*** ***"Let your message sink in."*** ***"Dear living Lord, you have saved us, renew our***

commitment to your Word, and by the power of your almighty word open our minds and fill our lives with the love us Jesus so that you move us to act and live according to your will."

The disciples had been with him for years learning from him, they had witnessed the very events that the Scriptures had foretold, but still they were struggling to comprehend and put into action the words of Jesus. And so Jesus in his final moments with his disciples pointed them to the entirety of the Scriptures. Learn from Moses, the Law, the Prophets, and Psalms, he says to them. Jesus encouraged them to remember what he had taught to them! Thus, through all these blessed and holy words Jesus would continually be with them, for the Scriptures all testified about him and were fulfilled in him. All of this would give them solid footing as through the power of his Word he would be with them as they took their next steps, wherever that would be. Yes, many changes and challenges were coming, but the word of the Lord was steadfast and true. And just as they had seen the Scriptures fulfilled in their presence as Jesus walked among them so too the promises of God would continue to be fulfilled after his departure. The one who died, and rose, and ascended back to his throne on high, would fulfill his promise to send his Holy Spirit, and the disciples would be well equipped to carry out the mission of Christ's kingdom for they would be clothed with power from on high.

We are blessed by this reminder too. In our sinful weakness, we tend to forget how the Lord has equipped and prepared us as well. We tend to hide behind thinly veiled excuses that we are ill-equipped, or we don't have the time or the expertise or the personality to go out and share the gospel. But remember how the Lord had equipped his disciples and know that you go out clothed with similar training and instruction and the same Spirit of God. Common, everyday folk (some of them former fishermen) would be equipped by the power of the Spirit working through the Word to go and share the gospel in different ways and with varied gifts and personalities. He would use poetic speakers and deep thinkers like John, passionate people like Peter, and personalities like Andrew who simply once told his brother we have found the Messiah. He would use Philip who with simple language invited another to "come and see" about this Jesus of Nazareth. God would use all their different personalities and strengths and abilities to serve in his kingdom. It is rather interesting that we don't know really that much about this group that looks up at Jesus and then goes out for him. Sure, we hear a lot about some of the more vocal disciples like Peter and John, but we don't know much about many of the others - for example the Bible doesn't tell us much at all about Bartholomew or Thaddaeus. However, we know that they were all well-equipped by Jesus' trustworthy promises and by the gift of the Holy Spirit. So too are you, with your different strengths, and abilities, each one of you is well equipped and prepared by the Word of God to serve your Lord and spread and strengthen his kingdom. Even if you are not the most vocal member of your congregation or "out in front" leader in your church, know that wherever we go, whatever challenges and changes you meet, each of you has the powerful word of God, and his precious promises that goes with you. For the one who speaks to us these promises and these lasting words of blessing and benediction is not some local celebrity delivering some commencement address that would be heard and then soon forgotten by a single graduating class. No, this was the almighty king of the universe who on his way back to his throne on heaven, spoke words that had everlasting authority and power. The all-powerful God who had every right to trample his disciples and all of us sinners as traitors and

deserters and enemies, calls out to his chosen people with words of forgiveness and grace and then enlists forgiven sinners like us into the service in his everlasting kingdom. What grace God showed to these disciples! What grace God shows to us!!

And along with that powerful word of promise, we look at this caring and compassionate Savior as he gives his people sign of his perpetual blessing, his ongoing protection and care. Luke tells us, That as Jesus led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, **“He lifted up his hands and blessed them. ⁵¹While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven.”**

Did you catch that description and the significance of this scene? While he was blessing them... This was the last thing that they would see, the last view of him, how they would remember him as he left. His hands are up in blessing as he is taken from their sight. This too, along with his Word, was a special gift that he leaves with his disciples, that he leaves with his church. On his way up into heaven, on this his coronation day, the King of Kings raises his arms in this symbolic gesture of goodwill and favor, and ongoing protection and care that remains extended over his church. Remember how Jesus had spoken this promise, “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age,” with those arms raised, he gives a lasting and powerful gesture of that same promised care and perpetual love.

Thus, we are blessed with the similar gesture repeated as we gather together for worship. Time after time, week after week, the minister standing in the place of Christ, sends us on our way with arms outstretched. He extends this gesture to God’s people as a reminder of this ongoing blessing that our Lord gives to his church.

As the disciples got ready for their big transition, we also remember how the disciples made good use of these parting gifts as they spent time together in worship. Even in this time of transition, when there were so many questions and uncertainty and anxiety that seemed to be knocking on their door, they found sanctuary in God’s house. When there were so many questions about what the future will hold, they came together and were blessed by the joy they shared in Jesus. **⁵²Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. ⁵³And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.** What a wonderful blessing we have again tonight, to come together on this festival of Ascension and be encouraged by one another and by our risen and ascended Lord. Through times of change and transition, the Lord is with his people. And the good news of repentance and forgiveness of sins continually goes out to the world as Lord brings his ongoing blessings. Give thanks to God that in his grace the good news of Jesus comes to us day after day and goes out to others through us, as well. Thanks be to God for the power of his Word and his continual presence among us, wherever his Word and his people may be. Amen.