

With Great Joy — Rev. Denise Stone

Text: Luke 24:44-53

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH BIG FLATS NY, 05-16-2021

Today represents the last Sunday in the church season of Easter. Today we focus on and celebrate the Ascension of Christ. We look at what this event means for us today.

Next week we will celebrate Pentecost and consider what Pentecost meant for the first believers and as well as what it means for us now.

Let us think for a few minutes this morning about what it might have been like to have been one of the few gathered on that post resurrection day. Let's imagine that we hear the words of Jesus and we see the events unfold with the other disciples. I invite you to close your eyes and imagine that you are there, hearing these words for the very first time.

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. ⁴⁹ And see, I am sending

upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

⁵⁰ Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. ⁵¹ While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. ⁵² And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; ⁵³ and they were continually in the temple blessing God.ⁱ

The Word of the Lord, **Thanks Be to God**

If you look at the Gospel of Luke, you will find that it begins and ends in similar ways.

Near the beginning we find Mary and Joseph bringing the baby Jesus to the temple where Simeon takes Jesus into his arms and blesses God for allow for allowing him to see the Messiah before the end of his life.

At the end of Luke, we find the resurrected Jesus appearing to the disciples who were in Jerusalem—leading them out near Bethany.

It is there that Jesus opens the minds of the disciples to understand how Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament scriptures. Jesus declares that the disciples are witnesses and that God will make good on his promise – they are to wait in Jerusalem for God to “clothe” them with power from on high.

Then Luke tells us that **while** Jesus was blessing the disciples, he “withdrew from them and was carried up into **heaven.**”

From there the disciples worshipped Jesus and returned to Jerusalem “with great joy” and Luke also tells us that the disciples, “they were continually in the temple blessing God.”

What do we learn from all of this?

I have tried to put myself in the place of the disciples this week.

Think about it. Just 40 days earlier, the disciples would have been grief-filled, and frightened. They then discover that Jesus is resurrected. He is no longer dead. Jesus is among them at various times. He eats with them, and shows them his crucifixion scars.

The disciples’ grief turns to confusion and possibly unbelief to wow – he’s really here.

Luke tells us that Jesus continues teaching the disciples while he is with them. Reinforcing for them the things he had taught them prior to the crucifixion.

Part of what Jesus tells them, in verses 46 and 47 is “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.”

This was part of Jesus’ message all along, but it is re-emphasized for the disciples here, just before Jesus is to leave them.

In law, the last words a person speaks holds more weight than might have been given to them in other circumstances. For instance, a death-bed confession is considered more significant, because a dying person has nothing to lose by telling the truth.

The things that Jesus says here are particularly important because they are some of the last things Jesus says to the disciples.

Jesus tells them that they are witnesses of all these things – the implication is that they are to be “telling” witnesses. They are to share the information with others.

Jesus then leads them out near the town of Bethany, blesses them – and as he is blessing them, he departs from them.

This is where I have really been trying to think like I imagine the disciple were thinking.

I’ve gone from grief and fear to confusion and joy and now... what would I be feeling?

Jesus is gone again. He has ascended to heaven. I know or at least suspect that I’ll never see Jesus in the flesh again.

I would be experiencing grief all over again.

But what do verses 52 and 53 tell us about the disciples?

⁵² And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; ⁵³ and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

This is NOT what I would have expected.

They worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Okay – maybe I get the worshipped him piece.

But they returned to Jerusalem with great joy? And were continually in the temple blessing God?

The disciples **ARE** in Jerusalem waiting for the promised power of the Holy Spirit from God (note: this is a spoiler for next Sunday). So – I can see the blessing God piece as well.

It is the returning to Jerusalem with great joy that has had me stumped this week.

I did a little digging into what other people thought biblical joy was. The best, most concise answer I found was from Christianity Today.

Biblical joy is choosing to respond to external circumstances with inner contentment and satisfaction, because we know that God will use these experiences to accomplish His work in and through our lives.ⁱⁱ

This is different than how we typically think of joy in today's world. Most people view joy as the equivalent of feelings of happiness. Biblical joy is more about contentment in knowing that God will use us and our experiences.

Jesus leaving the disciples was a point of joy of the disciples because he was ascending to heaven as part of God's larger plan – that included them. They were witnesses. They were

messengers. Jesus told them these things. That God would be with them through the Holy Spirit.

There was much in which to find joy.

There still is much in which to find joy.

Yes, we are in the second half of a global pandemic. Yes, there is political and social unrest in our country as well as in other countries. Yes, there are religious differences between larger religious groups and even within our own Christian denominations.

But there IS STILL much in which to find joy.

When Luke says that Jesus is blessing the disciples as he departs from them, this is significant. Note, the blessing didn't end and then Jesus departs. This blessing continues.

We are also recipients of that blessing.

Just as Jesus opened the minds of the disciples to understand the Scriptures, if we allow the Holy Spirit to continue its work in us, God-willing, our minds will be opened too.

The disciples came to understand their position as witnesses to the mighty works of God through Jesus Christ. They came to understand that God's love was not limited to a small group of people in the middle of Palestine, but to the whole world.

They found and claimed great joy.

They worshipped in the temple - blessing God. Praising God.

And they changed the world.

Our role as followers of Jesus Christ today is the same as it was for the first followers of Jesus Christ.

We are to understand OUR position as witnesses to the mighty works of God through Jesus Christ. We are to understand that God's love IS NOT limited to a small group of people in the middle of Palestine or in the middle of New York, but to the whole world.

We can find and claim great joy.

We can worship together – blessing God. Praising God.

And, because we know that God will use OUR experiences to accomplish His work in and through our lives, WE TOO, can change the world.

As you think about joy, please consider the words of this blessing, written by John Birch.

Our walk with God
is never a lonely walk,
it is a family occasion,
if taken in the company
of God's children.
If we lag behind,
there are those who will turn
and offer words of encouragement,
hold out a hand and offer assistance
over stiles and other obstacles,
share refreshment,
help us from our knees

when we stumble.

Our walk with God
is never a lonely walk.
It is a joyful experience,
as along the path others join us,
attracted by the company
of God's children,
singing the same songs of praise
that angels sing,
following a path
worn down by tears and joy,
and sacrifice.

Our walk with God
is never a lonely walk,
for he walks with us,
on a track that leads
to a glorious destination.ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

ⁱⁱ Mel Walker, Contributing Writer, <https://www.christianity.com/wiki/christian-terms/what-is-joy-in-christianity.html>.

ⁱⁱⁱ https://www.faithandworship.com/prayer_journey.htm#gsc.tab=0.