



## Third Sunday of Easter April 15, 2018

Psalm 4    Acts 3:12-19    1 John 3:1-7    Luke 24:36b-48  
(Luke 24:1-43) (Luke 24:44-53)

### Commentary on the Text

#### Luke 24:36b-48

#### Introduction and Context

Since this 24th chapter of Luke is so well used in the Lectionary, some of the commentary is repeated from other readings. However, each reading contains a different emphasis, so additional and more detailed information on some aspects is available in the other commentaries listed to the right (Readings also used).

The resurrection narrative in Luke 24 consists of five smaller stories:

- (1) the discovery of the empty tomb by the women (**vv. 1-12**)
- (2) appearance of Jesus to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (**vv. 13-35**)
- (3) appearance of Jesus to the eleven and their companions (**vv. 36-43**).
- (4) the commissioning of the eleven (**vv. 44-49**)
- (5) the ascension of Jesus (**vv. 50-53**).

The reading for this third Sunday of Easter combines the two stories that focus on Jesus' appearance to the remaining eleven disciples. However, we should keep in mind the larger context and thrust of the entire chapter. Here, Luke has presented us with the impact and significance of the resurrection. But the story is told not just as a proposition to be accepted. It is presented as an unfolding realization in the context of doubt, fear, and uncertainty, and that must be explained and understood by instruction from Scriptures, first to the two men on the road to Emmaus and then to the disciples themselves. It also becomes clear as the chapter unfolds that there is a liturgical and

sacramental dimension to the story as personal encounter with the resurrected Lord leads first to realization and then to commissioning and the response of worship.

While the lectionary stops short of including verse 49, waiting until Ascension Sunday just before Pentecost to deal with this verse, it is really an integral part of the commissioning story in verses 44-49. To truncate the reading in this way does serious damage to the nature of the resurrected Jesus' commissioning of the disciples. It is not enough that they are commissioned to be witnesses; there must also be some source for their ability to fulfill that commissioning. Throughout Scripture, commissioning from God carried with it a confession of inadequacy from the one commissioned, followed by an assurance of God's presence to fulfill the task (*e.g.*, Exod 3:7-12).. It is such a deeply held understanding of God that a regular literary form developed to express it (see **Prophetic Call Narrative**). That deeply rooted theological perspective should be maintained here, especially since Luke has already made use of that literary structure in reporting the "commissioning" of Mary at the beginning of his Gospel (Luke 1:26-38). So the passage will be treated here with verse 49 as part of the reading.

We should also keep in mind that this climactic chapter of Luke's Gospel becomes the prologue for the book of Acts, the second volume of Luke's two-volume work (Acts 1:1). Beyond simply the continuation of the narrative, Acts makes three important theological connections with this conclusion of Luke's Gospel. **First** is the obvious fact that whatever unfolds in Acts is grounded not only in the life and teachings of Jesus but also in his resurrection (Acts 1:1-2). **Second**, the spread of the church in Acts is linked to the re-commissioning of the eleven by Jesus following his resurrection. And **finally**, the theme of the work of the Holy Spirit that has been a thread woven throughout Luke's Gospel, and that Jesus gives as a promise in the final chapter of Luke, becomes the cornerstone of the vitality of the church in Acts. It is in this context that the reading for this Sunday must be heard. (See links above for commentary on other parts of this chapter; for further comments on the relationship between Luke and Acts see the **Commentary on Luke 24**.)

There are only two post-resurrection appearances of Jesus in Luke, both of which are unique to Luke's Gospel. Jesus first appears to the two men on the road to Emmaus (24:13-35), and then to the disciples at the beginning of this passage (24:36-52). Both have overtones of liturgical

shaping that suggest use in the early church in worship, perhaps in an Easter liturgy. The Emmaus story clearly has a Eucharistic setting (v. 35), while the final story concludes with a double emphasis on the community in worship (v. 52). This suggests that these stories are not simply the reporting of event, but are highly reflective theological recounting, bringing Gospel traditions to bear on the needs, concerns, mission, and identity of the emerging Christian community.

Here sensitivity to how Luke uses narrative to communicate that reflective theology will help us better understand the text. Luke often uses individual characters and stories to represent much larger issues in the early church (recall the use of Peter and Cornelius to address the huge problem of the relations between Jewish and Gentile Christians; see the **Commentary on Acts 11:1-18**). Here, the issues seem to revolve around a few basic and interrelated concerns: questions, doubts, and confusion about the nature of the resurrection; a lack of understanding about the continued role and mission of the church in the absence of Jesus, especially in terms of the scope of that mission; ongoing questions about the relationship between Judaism and emerging Christianity, focused especially here on placing Jesus in continuity with the Old Testament witness; a need to preserve and pass on (witness) the meaning of the events surrounding Jesus. It is in relation to these concerns that our passage must be seen.

### **Appearance of Jesus to the eleven and their companions (Luke 24:36b-43)**

In this third episode in Luke 24, Jesus appeared to the eleven and bestowed his peace on them (vv. 36-43). In the midst of their terror, uncertainty, failures, and doubts, the presence of Jesus meant peace. While this is an important dimension here, the main thrust of the passage lies in the nature of Jesus' appearance and so the nature of the resurrection. Jesus assured the disciples that he was not a ghost, that he had flesh and bones. While this may not be an issue for us in the modern western world, in the ancient eastern world, and even in much of the modern eastern world, there was widespread belief in ghosts, the disembodied spirits of the departed who appeared to roam the earth or who could be summoned for advice (cf. 1 Sam 28:8 ff, Isa 19:3; note the Israelite prohibitions against contacting such spirits in Deut 18:11). It would not have been unusual in that culture to encounter such a ghost or spirit.

Luke strongly makes the point that this is not a ghost of the dead returned according to pagan superstition, but rather that this is the same real flesh and blood Jesus whom they had followed the past three years. Luke does not tell us that the disciples openly expressed their doubts and fears to Jesus, as John tells us about Thomas: "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe" (Jn 20:25). But the question is implied in Jesus' own question: "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?" (Lk 24: 38). Jesus first invited the disciples to "touch and see," to confirm with their senses what their minds would not accept. As a further evidence of a physical bodily resurrection, Jesus then took food and ate with them.

This serves here to establish that the resurrection was radically different than what many had come to believe about death and existence after death. We could debate the ways in which the resurrected Christ was different than the crucified Jesus. Of course, there is some sense in which the resurrected body that had defeated death was different. But the point here in Luke is the continuity of this resurrected Jesus with the Jesus with whom they had traveled in the journey from Galilee.

It is important to understand that significance in this story. The resurrected Jesus is not simply a spiritual entity. He is the same one who suffered and was crucified. The resurrection does not divorce Jesus from his previous life on earth. There is continuity between the earthly Jesus and the resurrected Lord. The body of Jesus that was subjected to torture and death had been brought back to life by God's power. And it is this very body that had been raised from the grave.

In addition to the cultural belief in ghosts and spirits, Luke may also be counteracting a Greek philosophical dualism that thought of humanity in terms of separable parts, body and soul (see **Body and Soul**). In this view, the physical body is evil, but the spiritual soul is good. In this conception, the soul of Jesus escaped his physical body at death and returned to immortality. Jesus did not really die, since the soul is immortal; only the physical body of Jesus died. So, there was no physical resurrection at all since the "real" Jesus, the spiritual Jesus, simply moved to a spiritual plane of existence when his physical body died. Yet, Luke carefully demonstrates that the resurrection of Jesus was not merely the immortality of his spirit or soul. His resurrection was the reversal of all that sinful humanity had done. Jesus had really died, and there was a physical finality in that death. But just as strongly

Luke affirms the bodily resurrection of Jesus, in which the physical Jesus lives again after the finality of death. This is the power of the resurrection for the early church and for us today!

This is not a mere resuscitation, however. God acted decisively in history by raising Christ from the dead, thereby doing something new in history. The resurrection of Jesus is victory over the power of death and sin. In the name of Jesus who died and was raised forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed to all nations (v. 47). Note here that there is no direct connection of the death of Jesus with any legal conception of atonement by which the death paid a penalty for sin or whereby Jesus' death was a substitution for others. While that idea would certainly develop in the early church, and has some foundation in Paul's writing, this passage is not about atonement theology that focuses on the death of Jesus. It is exclusively concerned with resurrection that focuses on new life. That distinction is important for hearing the message of Luke here.

### **The Commissioning of the Eleven (Luke 24:44-48)**

The opening verse of this reading (v. 44) clearly makes the connection between the risen Christ and the earthly Jesus. As the preceding verses have made that connection on the physical level (vv. 38-42), these verses make the same connection on the level of Jesus' teachings. Luke had anticipated this move earlier in the Gospel in the passion predictions where he has Jesus point ahead to this very connection (18:31, 22:37, and more subtly in 20:17). Just as similar concerns are expressed in John's Gospel (for example, John 14:25; see **Commentary on John 14:23-29**) there is concern here that the teachings of Jesus become the basis for the mission of the church in the world.

The reference to fulfillment of Scriptures (vv. 44-46; cf. Acts 3:8) should not be read as addressing modern concerns about proving the validity of Scripture based on the correspondence of prediction and fulfillment. Nor should it be seen as setting out a Christological method of exegesis whereby all passages of Scripture must somehow be related directly to Jesus, either as prediction or by means of allegory or typology. Nor must these verses be interpreted in any predestinarian mode. Rather the emphasis here is twofold in a different direction.

**First**, as earlier in the Emmaus account (vv. 27), and later again in Acts (8:35), Luke presents Jesus as the "fulfillment," or the *embodiment* to use an appropriate metaphor, of what the Old Testament Scriptures

taught. This reflects Luke's emphasis on the continuity of God's work with Israel and now with the church.

**Second**, there is the conviction in both the Lukan and Johannine traditions that Jesus cannot truly be comprehended apart from an ongoing empowerment from God (there are hints of this elsewhere as well, for example, Matt 16:18; cf. Gal 1:15-16). This suggests that even though Luke staunchly maintains continuity between Jesus and the Old Testament Scriptures, he also understands that such connection is not immediately and necessarily apparent (which itself severely limits the prediction-fulfillment apology as an inherent feature of the text itself). Even the teachings of Jesus that all the disciples had heard needed to be remembered and understood in light of both the resurrection and the new commissioning given to the church by the resurrected Christ (cf. John 15:9, 26).

So, the disciples needed to open themselves to hearing the Scriptures in light of this new action of God in the world. While John points to the Holy Spirit as the agent (although given directly by Jesus before he ascended, John 16:13, 20:22), Luke portrays Jesus as the teacher who "opened their minds" (v. 45) to understanding how the Scriptures had always defined the role that Jesus filled. This emphasizes the dependence of the apostles and the early church on God for understanding, which also reflects Luke's repeated focus on the enabling role of the Holy Spirit. It also lays the groundwork for the preaching ministry of the apostles as they open the meaning of the Scriptures to others. That this dimension of preaching, the explication of Scriptures in light of the new action of God in the world, is important to Luke is reflected in the first speech and sermon by Peter recorded in Acts (1:16, 2:16), as well as throughout the book.

It is also in this light that the phrase "it is written" (v. 46) should be understood. As Fred Craddock observes: "To say 'it is written' is the equivalent of saying, 'It has been God's plan all along.' In other words, the new is not really new but is the old properly interpreted. The plan of God already set forth in Scripture contains a message and an offer that constitutes the charter of the Christian mission." (*Luke*, Interpretation, p. 391).

The commission given to the disciples in these verses is firmly grounded in God's revelation of himself to his people from the beginning. The concept of "witness" had always been a feature of Old

Testament faith, although it had usually been interpreted primarily in terms of traditioning members of the community (for example, Deut 6:20-25; Exod 13:14-16; Josh 4:2-7; but note the counter voice of a wider vision in Gen 12:3, 18:22-33, Isa 42:6-7, 56:6-8). Here it is clearly expanded to include "all nations" (v. 47), which moves to the heart of the book of Acts. And Luke presents it in such a way that it is not a new development, but had always been God's purpose for His people.

The core elements of the Gospel message are also included in this commissioning: the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus (v. 46), and the proclamation of forgiveness of sins available to all nations (v. 47). These elements constitute the core of the sermons throughout the book of Acts, which indicates that these were the central elements of the proclamation of the early church.

For the disciples to be able to carry out this mission to the world, Luke returns to his emphasis on the Holy Spirit that he has woven through his Gospel from the beginning. Luke has consistently affirmed the "power" of the Holy Spirit at work at key junctures in the life of Jesus, especially in empowering the beginning of his ministry, even reaching back to the birth of John (for example, 1:15). Now he emphasizes the same power from the Holy Spirit at work in the birth of the church. Luke clearly places the commission of the church in the context of the disciples' need for the Holy Spirit's empowerment. They must wait for that empowerment before they can carry out their mission as the "witnesses of these things" (v. 48), with the unspoken implication that they cannot do so without it.

### **Preaching Paths**

As is often the case, this text lends itself to a variety of applications, both in general theological ideas and more congregation-specific application. Following Luke's lead down the more general path, this text calls for reflection on the nature and mission of the church as an expectant, waiting community.

The resurrection of Jesus was a new beginning for the disciples, and indeed for the world. Yet it was a new beginning that did not have such a glorious start. The disciples' hopes for a different future that had been shaped by a specific understanding of God's work in the world had been shattered as they had all watched Jesus die. "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel," they said (v. 21). They were filled with fear,

uncertainty, confusion, and hopelessness. Their assumptions about Jesus and about God had fallen apart. They were so devastated by the events of the past week that they could not even believe the first reports that Jesus had been raised.

What do we do when all the things we have thought and said and believed about God are contradicted by the things we actually experience in life? Could the disciples still be able to believe that Jesus was indeed the Messiah? The only way that could happen would be through a new beginning. It was in the midst of such uncertainty, questioning, and hopelessness that Jesus came to them, walked along with them, stood beside them, and opened up for them the possibility of renewal. And so the story continues beyond even the resurrection in Luke 24. The story goes on not because the disciples found within themselves a will to press on into the future. The story goes on because the resurrected Jesus came and sought his doubting, questioning, failing, and hopeless followers. Therein lies our hope. God comes to us in Jesus in surprising ways when we least expect it. This is the heart of the message here.

The Church lives in the in-between time, in a journey between the "already" of Jesus' birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension, and the "not yet" of his return. And yet that interim is not a passive waiting that is marked by inactivity, for the church is given a mission to be a witness to the world of the redemptive activity of God in Jesus the Christ. It is called to proclaim the good news of forgiveness and reconciliation, and the hope of newness that is given voice in the resurrection itself. It is a grand vision of being God's people, God's agents of transformation in the world.

But there is more here than a grand vision. The idea of a mission to the world is not an especially difficult one to grasp, or even to undertake. In fact, many eagerly latch onto the idea of a mission or a cause, and expend enormous amounts of energy trying to carry it out. Plans are drawn up. Strategies are put into place. Resources are marshaled. Criteria for success are formulated. Results are tabulated. And the mission is declared a success if the goals or stated objectives are achieved or even if there is "growth" on some level.

But that is not the heart of the message here. The message here is, first, **to wait**. To wait for the power. It is far easier to recruit people for a cause, or for a program, or for a crusade, than it is to ask them to wait.



And yet here, before the church can be the church, it must wait for the transforming power of God, for the ability to carry out that mission. There is a clear realization from the very beginning of Luke's Gospel, that we simply cannot do what God has called us to do on any level without God's help.

That enabling power for which the disciples are to wait is not something they can generate or make happen by their own efforts. It is a gift of God, in his own time and in his own way. It will be marvelous when it comes, and it will enable this group of disciples to storm the world with the message of the Gospel. But first they must wait. And they must wait without Jesus present, solely on his word that there would be an empowerment.

While we certainly do not want to stifle the enthusiasm of new converts, or discount the efforts of those who do any kind of proclamation of the Good News, perhaps we need to stop once in a while and reflect on whether we have waited sufficiently for the power, or if we are simply working in our own efforts. We have been on a long journey through Lent, from Ash Wednesday to Good Friday. And we have desperately waited with the disciples through the darkness of Good Friday and Saturday for the light of a new day. So if that day has dawned, why must we wait longer? Why, if Jesus is really the Messiah, if God is really the resurrection power, do we need to wait still longer?

The issue for us often becomes, "Whose mission is it, anyway?" It is a hard question, but one that needs to be asked often in the church. Are we doing what we do because we are following the commission given to us by the resurrected Lord? Or do we do what we do because we want to achieve certain goal or reach certain objectives? Are we the witnesses Jesus commissioned us to be?

If we try to be the church without the power of the Holy Spirit enabling our mission, we run the risk of expending a lot of energy and activity without really carrying out our mission. Or we run the risk of attributing success to our own skill, or zeal, or spiritual superiority, rather than to the One from whom the power for mission really comes. Luke tells us that the church cannot be the church without the power of the Holy Spirit enabling Jesus' followers to carry out their task as witnesses. Luke is clear that the church is the church only when it has waited until it has been clothed with power from on high. Otherwise, it may find itself like the emperor and his new clothes!

We have something about which we can bear witness! And yet, we realize that we cannot possibly do that in a world that does not really want to hear that message. So we are left with an utter dependency on the work of God to empower us for that task (cf. 1 Cor 3:6). And so we wait. But we wait with the full expectancy that the power will come, that the Spirit will so enable us as his people that we can boldly bear witness and proclaim the message.

This text can also be applied in more personal ways to the lives of people and congregations. There has been a tendency in our theological formulations to place the resurrection in a subordinate position to the death of Jesus. Of course, we still celebrate the resurrection and talk about how important it is. But when we want to talk about the real significance of the coming of Jesus we too often resort to the legal language of sin and forgiveness, which invariably shifts the focus to the death of Jesus and the theological categories of substitutionary atonement, justification, etc.. It is not that these categories are wrong. It is just not what *this* text is about.

*In fact, the emphasis in all of the Gospels is not on the death of Jesus and atonement for sins in any legal mode of thought, but on the simple fact of Jesus' life and teachings, his resurrection that vindicated those teachings, and the call to bear witness of that fact to the world.* Here in the climax of Luke's Gospel, we are presented with the resurrection as the basis for the church's commission to the world. That commission certainly includes a message of forgiveness (24:47), but grounded in the resurrection itself and not directly linked here to any theory of atonement that would thrust the death of Jesus to the foreground.

Maybe there is something in this that is important for people to hear. It is significant that for the first three hundred years of the church, the central feature of worship was the resurrection. So perhaps a return to a simple emphasis on the resurrection itself may say something important to people today. Let's return to the thrust of Luke's story and hear it against the background of today's world.

The disciples were shattered by broken dreams, lost hopes, unfulfilled expectations, and their own failures. When Jesus died, their future died with him (see **The Death of Hope**<sup>1</sup>). The disciples personify the plight of people throughout the ages who dream dreams that turn into nightmares, who build hopes that are shattered, who love only to experience death and heartache, who envision a future only to see it

dissolve before their eyes. Of all the things for which the human spirit yearns, it most needs hope, the possibility that there is a future beyond the endings of today, that there is a healing beyond the pain of the present, that there is something beyond the tears and darkness of a broken world. This is the significance of the journey through **Lent** and **Good Friday**, to walk in that darkness that leads to endings, to experience even in a vicarious way the awful human finality of the cross.

Yet, this is also the significance of the resurrection that we celebrate at **Easter!** When life has been shattered through tragedy and heartache, through sin and failure, the only hope for any future lies in what God alone can do and in our response to Him. The disciples could not even believe the good news brought by the women. Their hope for the future did not lie in their ability to muster up enough faith to believe the unbelievable. They were too discouraged and too afraid to have that much faith. Yet into the midst of their own fear and doubt, Jesus came to them as the resurrected Lord. He sat and ate with them, assuring them that the resurrection was a physical and present reality. On one level, this prevents us from spiritualizing relationship with God into some mystical experience disconnected from human existence. In Luke this serves to connect us back to the task of living in a real world as servants of God (cf. Lk 4:16-19). On another level, it assures us of a hope in the future that transcends all endings, even death itself (cf. 1 Cor 15:54-55).

The turning point for the disciples came when they encountered the presence of the resurrected Lord. *It was the resurrected Jesus who took the initiative to come to them to open their eyes to a new reality, to new possibilities because of that reality, and so brought them a hope that went beyond the endings of the past.* This calls us to that encounter with the presence of the risen Christ today. There are many ways that we could define how that encounter should or ought to occur. Perhaps *how* is not so important as proclaiming the possibility of the encounter that brings healing and wholeness, and hope. To meet the risen Lord is as much a possibility now as it was for the disciples or for Paul. It is not something that people in despair and hopelessness can muster enough faith to do. But part of our task as modern disciples is to proclaim to hopeless people the reality that Jesus is already seeking that encounter, and therefore that hope is alive!

*While the revivalist tradition tended to call people to repent by emphasizing sin and guilt, perhaps as much of our task as modern disciples is to proclaim the reality of the resurrected Lord as strongly, or perhaps even stronger, than we proclaim his atoning death.*

It is not that people do not need to repent. It is that for many people today, *hopelessness is a greater barrier to God than is sin*. This text allows us to address that hopelessness with a clear and unwavering proclamation of the reality of the resurrection that brings light into darkness, new beginnings into endings, and hope into despair. And when people have hope, they have reason to change, and allow God's transforming grace to reshape them into the image of his Son.

**-Jirair Tashjian** (Commentary) and **Dennis Bratcher** (Preaching Paths)

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<sup>1</sup>The Death of Hope [Jeremiah 24:1-10] <http://www.crivoice.org/S-hope.html>



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