

Luke 24:36-53

Introduction

It's understandable if the disciples don't know which way is up at this point in time. Their world has been turned on its head.

Barely have they had the chance to process the arrest and execution of their Lord and Teacher, when suddenly they're confronted with the puzzle of an empty tomb and multiple claims that he has risen. And if that's not enough, now some of their number are reporting that the risen Jesus has appeared to them and broken bread with them.

What should they make of it all?

What on earth was going on?

Well, it's in that context that we read of the events in these final verses of Luke's Gospel. They begin with fear and end with worship. And they contain a promise for the future and a task for today, which are our two headings this Easter morning.

So firstly, then, this passage contains a promise for the future. That's our first heading: a promise for the future.

A promise for the future

Please look down again, first of all, at verses 36 and 37.

While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.' They were startled and terrified, thinking they saw a ghost.

The risen Lord Jesus suddenly stands among his disciples and bids them peace. They recoil in terror, thinking this must be a ghost. It's almost comical. Yet it's truly wonderful.

'Peace be with you,' he says.

Those words were a common, everyday greeting. Yet when Jesus says them, this side of the cross, they're packed full of meaning.

The word 'Peace' expresses the Jewish idea of 'Shalom'. It's more than just the absence of anxiety or conflict, although it includes that. 'Shalom' implies wholeness and harmony and perfection. One writer describes 'Shalom' as 'the way things ought to be'.

Of course, the world isn't the way it should be. At one time it was. In the very beginning, when God created the world and filled it, there was peace. Life in the garden of Eden was one of wholeness and harmony and perfection. It was paradise. But that was all lost when Adam and Eve sinned. Since then, human existence has been riddled with enmity and struggle...with God, with creation, with one another.

The disciples certainly didn't have peace. They were racked with guilt over their failure to stand by Jesus in the moments leading up to his arrest. They were afraid of the Jewish leaders who, they presumed, were out to get them too. And they were confused over claims that Jesus had risen, not really knowing what to believe.

It's into that context of fear and confusion that Jesus comes. And the very first thing he says to his disciples is to bid them 'Peace' or 'Shalom'.

That's what his death and resurrection has accomplished.

At the cross, Jesus won forgiveness for his people. He has dealt with our sin and removed the barrier that came between us and God. He has restored our relationship *with* God, and brought us peace.

His resurrection contains the promise that everything will be made new: not only do we have peace with God but, one day, peace will be restored to creation. Once again the world will exist in wholeness and harmony and perfection. One day, all that's wrong with the world will be put right; everything that's broken will be restored.

That's the promise contained in Jesus' greeting: 'Peace be with you.' Because of the cross, peace, or shalom, will be restored to the whole of creation.

And we long for that peace.

Who hasn't struggled through this coronavirus pandemic and not longed for a world without illness or disease?

Who hasn't listened to accounts of cultural racism and racially motivated violence and not longed for a world without prejudice and discrimination?

Who hasn't read the recently published reports of sexual abuse in our schools and not longed for a world without exploitation and cruelty?

Who hasn't grieved for a loved one and not longed for a world without death or mourning or crying or pain?

Jesus' greeting here contains the promise that peace is coming. One day, the world will be as it ought to be. Shalom will be restored and we will live in perfect peace and harmony: with God, with creation and with one another.

And his bodily resurrection is the guarantee that you and I will be part of it. His resurrection is the guarantee of our own.

That's why it's so important that we know his resurrection is physical and bodily.

Please look down again at verses 38 to 43.

[Jesus] said to them, 'Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.'

When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, 'Do you have anything here to eat?' They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence.

The disciples couldn't believe that Jesus was physically present with them because of joy and amazement. It just seemed too good to be true.

So he told them to touch him, to assure them that he really was 'flesh and bones'. He showed them his hands and feet, presumably, because they still bore the marks of his crucifixion. He ate some of their fish to show that his body was like theirs and that he wasn't a ghost.

That was the *immediate* issue: the disciples needed to be persuaded that Jesus wasn't a ghost. But Jesus is doing more than that. He isn't just proving that *his* resurrection is physical. He's assuring us that *ours* will be too.

His resurrection is the guarantee of our own. That message is at the heart of the gospel.

In 1 Corinthians, chapter 15, the apostle Paul speaks of the resurrection of the dead. He says that if Christ didn't rise from the dead then we have no hope and we're to be pitied. But then he goes on, in verse 15:

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. (1 Corinthians 15:20-23)

Jesus is the 'firstfruits'. He has gone through death ahead of us. But one day he will return. On that day he will make all things new. Creation will be restored. And on that day we will be with him, clothed in our resurrection bodies.

Creation will know peace, or 'Shalom', once again. And we will be part of it.

What a wonderful and certain hope we have, because of Jesus!

You and I can begin to experience that peace now as followers of Jesus, knowing that our sin is forgiven and that our relationship with God has been restored. And we can look forward to a day when we will enjoy that peace fully and perfectly when we are clothed in our resurrection bodies, in a world made new.

It's a wonderful hope, made certain through the bodily resurrection of Jesus...and it's far too good to keep to ourselves.

So having read of a promise for the future, Jesus now gives us a task for today. That's our second heading: a task for today.

A task for today

Please look down at verse 44.

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.'

Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, 'This is what is written: the Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I 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.'

Jesus explains to the disciples that everything they have witnessed over the last few days was spoken of beforehand in the scriptures. The scriptures foretold that he must die and then rise again. He had done that.

But he doesn't stop there.

He opens their minds to show them that the same scriptures also speak of repentance for the forgiveness of sins being preached in his name to all nations. The good news of the gospel wasn't just to remain with the disciples, God's plan all along was for it to go to the nations.

Clearly that task is beyond this little band of disciples. This is the task of the church. This is *our* task.

The job that God has given us to do, along with all his people, is to tell the world the good news of Jesus. It's to call them to repentance and faith in him, so they might receive forgiveness of sins and enjoy the peace he brings.

Notice the source of the message we're to proclaim: it's there in verse 48. It's the testimony of the apostles. They saw everything with their own eyes, and heard everything with their own ears. They recorded it for us in the pages of the New Testament. And it's their testimony that we're to pass on. We're not to deviate from it or change it. We're to proclaim the gospel with a Bible in our hands.

And notice where strength for the task comes from: it's from the Holy Spirit. Our witness to the world is Spirit-empowered.

In the book of Acts, Luke records the coming of the Spirit and the start of that work at Pentecost. And the work continues today.

This is our work.

As lockdown ends, and restrictions are eased, and as the country opens up once again, this is the job that God has given us to do: to tell others about Jesus.

It's a daunting task, which, humanly speaking, is beyond us. That's why God has given us his Spirit to empower us. And there's one further encouragement as the chapter ends.

Please look down at verse 50.

When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.

In Acts, Luke tells us that 40 days passed between Jesus' resurrection and his ascension to heaven, recorded in these verses. During that time he appeared to numerous people, giving many convincing proofs that he was risen. The apostle Paul tells us that on one occasion he appeared to 500 people at the same time, who were still alive when he wrote, and could testify to what they'd seen.

And then, the time came for his departure.

Having led the disciples out to the town of Bethany, he blessed them and was taken up into heaven.

That's where the risen Jesus is today. He has ascended into heaven, where he is seated at the right of God the Father, interceding for his people.

With the Lord Jesus on his throne, the Spirit in our hearts, and the Bible in our hands, we couldn't be better set for the work that God has given us to do.

Over the last few days, as we've followed the Easter story, we've seen Jesus' resolve to go to the cross to win forgiveness for sin. And now we're to have that same resolve as we take the message of forgiveness to our friends and neighbours and colleagues.

We've got great news to share. We've got the hope of heaven to tell them about. We've got a message of peace: of wholeness and wellbeing and shalom. It's the best news that people can hear. And what a privilege that God would allow us to be the ones to tell them!

The disciples worshipped Jesus and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, praising God. And we should share their joy as we consider the message of Easter and go about the work that the risen Jesus has given us to do.

Let's pray.