

The Joyous Goodbye

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[0 : 00] Thank you very much. This passage concludes the Gospel of Luke, our time in the 24th chapter of Luke, and begins in the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 1.

It's a kind of decisive turning point because it marks the end of Christ's earthly ministry and the beginning of the ministry of the community of the Holy Spirit, which is the church.

That Christ leaves and his... I often wonder about why things like that happen now, but Christ leaves and he leaves the counselor who is the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit works with the community of people, and that community of the Holy Spirit comes to be known as the Church of Jesus Christ.

So, it's a decisive turning point that we've come to, and I want to tell you a few of the things that mark it. If you look at the text, he led them out as far as Bethany, which isn't very far.

Lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he blessed them, they were in the temple. They went and were in the temple continually blessing him.

[1 : 25] Look just at that first. You remember that in the Sermon on the Mount, it's always, blessed, blessed, blessed the poor in spirit, the hungry, those who hunger and thirst after righteousness.

Always there is the word blessed. And some people would like to come along and change it and make it into the word happy. But what happens is that you have this sense in which here you are, and Jesus blesses or blessed the disciples, and then you find that they went into the temple, and they blessed God in the temple.

So, it's a kind of thing you can change around it, that you are blessed and you bless. Yes, you know, the pursuit of happiness is that you can be happy, but you don't necessarily have to make anybody else happy.

So, that this is a peculiar kind of New Testament word, and when somebody says, God bless you, it means that as God blesses you, so you respond by blessing him.

So, you find that one of the basic functions that comes as a result of this is the beginning of worship. As Christ has blessed them, so they make it their business to worship God and to bless God.

[2 : 44] That's the first thing you notice about it. The second thing is that there was great joy. And joy in the New Testament is always a peculiar word that comes out of trial, difficulty, and hardship.

Joy is not the final arrival at the goal that you have worked for all your life and now you have joy.

Joy is when you have gone in obedience down a road that you didn't know and you suddenly discover to your great surprise there is joy there.

Christ learned, I mean, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross. Joy is the result of obedience.

And so that there was great joy with the disciples when they came to the point of Christ's ascension.

The next thing you notice if you look on in the passage from Acts is the disciples come back to saying, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?

Now, that's a great statement because remember, the disciples on the road to Emmaus walking with Christ after his resurrection said, we hope that it was he that would redeem Israel.

[4 : 02] And here now the resurrection has taken place and Christ is teaching with his disciples before his ascension and they say, now will you restore Israel.

Well, of course, the difficulty is for the church always is that we have much too small a goal for God. You know, if God would look after this problem and this problem and this problem, then he could take some time off and we would do our thing and he could do his thing for a while. And only when we got back into trouble, we would call on him again.

So they always want to get God to do their thing. And their thing, as they understood it, was to restore Israel, to make America prosperous, to make Canada united, to bring our world to be at one.

We have all these good things for God to do if he would only pay attention and finally get around to doing them. And we're always calling on him, why doesn't God get at it?

[5 : 03] You know, everything else is in place, now get at it. Will you now restore Israel, they say to him. Well, of course, Jesus turns to them and I guess I think of it in terms of a sigh of great patience.

He says, no. He says, look, you're going to remain in a condition of agnosticism.

You're not going to know the times. You're not going to know the seasons. You're not going to know what it is that God is doing at a particular time. That's not going to be given to you.

Now, lots of people have built religions around the fact that they do know. We know when it's going to happen and we can tell you when it's going to happen. And if you join us, we will. Well, you know, a lot that's...

But Jesus teaches fairly plainly that that's not going to belong to the church, to know that. So he says you're going to be agnostic about times and seasons. The thing you are going to know, though, he says, is this.

[6 : 04] You're going to have power. Power is going to come upon you. You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you.

So you're going to belong to a community in which there is a power at work. A power which isn't the result of just you getting together.

There's going to be a power which is the power of the Holy Spirit among you. Now, I want to point out to you that there are no saints in the New Testament. I now withdraw that statement because I missed it.

That was my punchline and I flubbed it. What I was going to say was, if you could wipe that out, there are no single saints in the New Testament.

It's always in the plural. It's always a company of people. But the community of the Holy Spirit is always people met together in Christ's name.

[7 : 03] It's always like that. And one of the distractions you have in the church is the people who feel singularly called because God has given it to them and they happen to know, even though nobody else knows.

Well, in the community of the Holy Spirit, people have to live in relationship to one another. The power will come upon you as a community. And then the result of that power coming upon you is that you will witness.

You will witness in Jerusalem, in Samaria, to the uttermost parts of the earth. You will be my witnesses. The function that you will have then is to bless God, to be a community in which the power of God is demonstrated in the work of the Holy Spirit, and to be a witness to Jesus in Jerusalem, in Samaria, and in Rome.

And that, incidentally, tells you what the Acts of the Apostles is about. It's about how this community, beginning in Jerusalem, moved to Samaria, and ended up in Rome within the lifetime of those who began the story.

So, Jesus says, the time has come. It's necessary to go away. There's one other thing which I think is a lovely part of the story, and that is where the angels interfere again.

[8 : 29] And they were gazing up into heaven. And the angels came along and said, men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up into heaven?

So that the characteristic posture of the Christian is not to be like this, you know, waiting for it to happen and looking up into heaven. No, get going.

Get moving, you know. Don't stand there looking up into heaven. Get on with what happens. And this Jesus who was taken from you into heaven will come again.

So, there you have, on that day, Christ lifted up his hands. He blessed them. They saw him for the last time.

He was received out of their sight. He ascended into heaven. I mean, that's how we describe what happened in the creeds. Well, he returns to be with the Father.

[9 : 35] There are certain things about that which I think we probably tend to overlook. We're very strong on Christmas. We're very strong on Christmas. Fairly strong on the crucifixion on Good

Friday.

Very big on Easter. But ascension tends to slip by. And we don't recognize that here is Christ being enthroned in heaven on the right hand of God.

He is the one that Paul says to him ultimately, Every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

He is exalted to the right hand of God. He is enthroned. He is put in the place of ultimate authority.

He is the one by whose word, we're told in Hebrews, the whole of the universe hangs together.

But there's a wonderful confirmation in that, in that science tells you they don't know how it all holds together. Why doesn't the world just blow apart?

[10:38] So somehow in the strange economy of God's revelation, it says way back in Hebrews, it's by his word that the whole thing holds together.

He's the one that keeps it all from falling apart. If it was left to us, it would collapse. But he is the exalted Lord who has been enthroned in heaven.

He is to be our judge. And he is the one who, at the end of history, will come again. Well, you see, the whole church of Christ derives from this community.

This community that sees Christ ascend out of their sight. That community head back to Jerusalem and they're daily in the temple, blessing God who has blessed them.

And it's out of that community that the church begins. Now, I want to show you something that people aren't very happy with, the church these days, and the things it says.

[11:45] But I want to show you something of what happens. There's a... You very often see the church in three ways. I don't know whether to put them like this and like this and like this because there's inevitably an order from left to right, unless you read Hebrew and then you can go from right to left.

But what's been left behind is a community over here. And this is a historic community which we tend to refer to as the one holy Catholic and apostolic church.

That is the church which, beginning from this point in time, has been continuous over the centuries.

And that church has remained. And the head of that church is the Bishop of Rome.

And that that historic community is the community of Christ's church with continuity that dates back to this moment. That's one way of looking at the church. And that's why many people, I think, become Roman Catholics late in life.

Like people like... Who was that? Well, there's some amazing converts, one of whom I can't think now, except that he wrote *Father Brown Mysteries*.

[12:58] Chesterton. G.K. Chesterton. You know, that he recognized that that church, that community, was the historic community that derived from the apostles.

You can put the apostles up here and say that this is the historic continuity of the apostles. Then along came the reformers, and they accepted the book.

And they said, this is the witness of the apostles, not necessarily the continuing community. But this is what the apostles said.

Their testimony has been left. And so when you see a new community church springing up here and a new community church springing up there and a new congregation starting up here, and this is the church of God starting here and all these kinds of things happening, they're happening because they say historical continuity isn't what matters.

It's the testimony of the apostles that matters. It is the scriptures, the word of God. And on the basis of the scriptures, we can create a church. We don't have to have historical continuity because historical continuity obviously has gone wrong.

[14:09] And so we create a new community which is based on the witness. And then you have, I'm going to get in deep trouble before I'm through here, but I'm going to press on anyway.

Then you have the other community which says, in a sense, we are the reasonable people. And we think that this is what the apostles would do if they were here.

We admire them and we respect them, but they are really 2,000 years out of date, and we are prepared to exercise our reason. And on the basis of our general interest in that community, we're prepared to tell you what happens.

Now, that's why when you come to a question like abortion, you go over to this community and they say, I mean, historically they have tended to say, the child has the rights and the mother has the problem.

So save the child. Then you come to this community here which says, well, the couple have rights and they have responsibilities.

[15 : 28] And so what we have to do is overlook the problem of abortion. Say that it shouldn't happen. And then you come to this community over here and you find that the woman has the rights.

Rights that have been long and historically been neglected, they are now there. And so you find the church having a grand time debating a very, very complex issue, a very profound issue, and debating it from the point of view, we are the historic community and we say this.

We are the people of the word and we say this. We are the people who exercise reason and we say this. And so you have a kind of built-in tension in the community of Christ's people.

And you get the same kind of thing when you bring up the subject of marriage. Over here you say marriage is forever and for always and indissoluble.

And if you go to the Roman Catholic Church to be married again, they say, I'm sorry, you are already married. The only thing they will do is consider the possibility that a marriage never was there in the first place.

[16 : 38] Or you may go to this community here and they say, this is a sin, but it's forgivable. Or you go over here and they're playing with the possibility that for the sake of the family, the husband and wife should be together, but a certain amount of sexual promiscuity is permissible.

Because that's the only way that man can fulfill his manifest sexual destiny. And so you get this tension going on all the time as people try and face these issues and try and debate what's happening here.

And the church, I think, really has, and as you read the scriptures, you've got to recognize, that it has community, it has the witness, and it has reason.

And somehow, instead of these groups floating apart, they really have to be made responsible to one another to answer one another. Now, you know as well as I do that there are some people that go way over here and create a totally elite community, often based on something other than the apostles.

Or you get people who go way over here and say, you can do whatever feels good. You know, you can create a religion out of that. But that's sort of at the center of the spectrum of what man does religiously.

[18 : 07] And how man responds to that community which God has established through the teaching, the miracles, the life, the death, the resurrection, and the ascension of Jesus Christ.

Well, now, that's really just to upset you to tell you that. And you can work that out afterwards. What I want to do from that, though, is try and help you to see why Christ's ascension is so significant.

You know, when you're speaking in the Creed, you say that he was born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified dead and buried. He ascended into heaven and is seated on the right hand of God the Father.

All that is the kind of description of who the second person of the Godhead is, who Jesus Christ is. Well, what I want you to understand, then, is this.

That the ascended Christ is, with apologies to the feminists, I'm going to use this, but I, he is man, representing, he is the representative of mankind.

[19 : 25] If you want to know who mankind is, if you want to know who man is in the generic sense, he is Jesus Christ. And where is he?

He is in a position of authority and power in bodily form on the right hand of the Father. Father.

Now, what that means, then, is that you cannot describe man in his fullness in terms of three score years and ten, you know.

You can't describe a period of the human being locked into the process of time and space for what is, in fact, just a flicker of time, that man stands in the presence of God.

And that, ultimately, that is the meaning of human life. That human life should all stand, ultimately, in the presence of God. That's why it was created.

That's why we have been given life, that we are, ultimately, to stand in the presence of God. So, that's terribly important. And that's why the ascension is part of the revelation God has made of himself.

[20 : 46] There is the incarnation in which God becomes man. There is the humiliation in which God, as man, is crucified. There is the glorification when God raises him from the dead.

And then there is the ascension, where man ascends into the presence of God. And human life has to know that fullness.

All human life. That's why the Bible has a very, very high view of humanity in every form it takes. Well, that's the first thing. The second thing, that Christ, by ascending into heaven, he, you know they talk about manifest destiny.

Well, the manifest destiny of the whole of humanity is demonstrated to us by Christ's ascension into heaven. That is God's purpose for us.

[21 : 47] Now, we're prepared to say, don't bother. I can get all I want out of life here and now. Just give me a few breaks. And a little money, and I'll get it right now. You know, and that sort of eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow, we don't know about.

Well, we do know about it. And that if you want to understand this life, you can only understand it in terms of God's ultimate purpose. And God's ultimate purpose is revealed in Jesus Christ by his ascension into heaven.

Well, what it means then is that it becomes possible for me to give up my self-centered existence and submit myself to the purposes of God.

I don't have to grab everything because I'm only going this way once. I don't have to find the totality of human experience compressed in to my body and the time that I live.

I don't have to get everything. I could, in fact, live for the benefit of other people. I could give my whole life away for somebody else. Because my manifest destiny does not have to be realized in terms of here and now.

[22 : 59] Because I recognize through Christ that my purpose as a human being transcends here and now. As I see Jesus Christ ascended into heaven. So you can afford to give up that purpose, that sort of self-centered purpose, in order to allow God to fulfill his purpose in your life.

That's what it means. Well, I want to go on and I want to tell you that he is also your judge. He is the one God has appointed to judge the world. This is the one by whom you will be judged.

And judgment, I think, is a necessary thing, not an imposition. But we all must face the judgment of God. In order that our life should have any meaning, it's got to face judgment, ultimately.

It's not something to be avoided. It's part of the essential nature of life, is that we face judgment.

Well, who is going to be judged? Well, most of us live in fear that the person around us, the person next to us, the person in our community, is going to judge us.

That's not true. They may condemn us all our life. They may consider us useless. They may take us out and shoot us or hang us. Because they don't know what to do with us. But our ultimate judge is this one who has...

[24 : 19] God who's become man, who has lived, who has died, who has risen again, and who has ascended into heaven. And he is to be our judge. And I can accept his just condemnation of me, trusting in his ultimate purpose for me.

And you see, you've got to come to accept that fact of God's judgment of us because of his ultimate and loving purpose for us. This one who has ascended, as I have said, is the sustainer of the universe, and his return will mark the end of history.

History will come to an end when this one, Jesus Christ, who has ascended into heaven, returns in the way that it says in the passage. This Jesus who was taken from you into heaven will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.

So that the cardinal reality of our lives is that we are living here and now in obedience to Christ, in the community of his Holy Spirit, and in the expectation of his return.

That's what the church is. You know, it may debate very hard about issues, as it must. And it may wander a long way from the central reality.

[25 : 42] But at the center is the person of Jesus Christ, who is what man is supposed to be, who is judge, who is the creator and sustainer of the universe, and who at the end of history will come again.

And we live and find the meaning of our life out of our relationship to him. Besides which, every other dimension of our life is just yesterday morning's headline.

That's the most it could be. Okay, let's just bow our heads. Our God, as we contemplate this amazing story of the ascension of your Son to your right hand, his enthronement, the display that you have made of him as being the one in whom we see the ultimate purpose you have for all of us in all history.

The one whom you have appointed to be our judge, and the one who will one day come again to bring history to a close. Help us, our God, in our personal life and in our life together, to live in relationship to Jesus Christ, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, crucified, dead, buried, who on the third day rose again, ascended into heaven, and is seated on the right hand of God.

We ask in his name. Amen.