

WITNESSES OF HIS RESURRECTION ~ LUKE 24:44-53

PASTOR COLIN RIEKE ~ MAY 25, 2014

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." ⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. ⁴⁶ He told them, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ 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." ⁵⁰ When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. ⁵¹ While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. ⁵² Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. ⁵³ And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.



Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, in his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, Amen!

We take it for granted all the time. We go about our day, we talk about it we converse with other people about it, and don't even wonder what it would be like without it. What I'm specifically talking about is our system of dating around the birth of Jesus Christ. The dates before Christ was born we call BC (Before Christ), the dates after Christ was born we call AD. Those two letters stand for the Latin phrase, *anno domini* or "Year of our Lord." How difficult it would have been if we did not have a standard system for measuring time. And the person we can thank for putting that into widespread usage is the Venerable Bede.

The Venerable Bede was a monk who lived in the 600/700s AD in England. In addition to being a theological scholar, he was also the first to record the history of the English people from the time of Julius Caesar until his day. He is considered the Father of English history. I bring this up because he died shortly after he completed his translation of the gospel of John, which also happened to be Ascension Day, May 25th, the same day as today. He is also the one who first wrote down the Ascension Day prayer we spoke just a few minutes ago.

Now Ascension is one of those church holidays that doesn't get a whole lot of publicity, it falls forty days after Easter which always puts it on a Thursday. Usually, if a church doesn't have a special Ascension Day service on Thursday, they will celebrate it on the Sunday following. In Christian freedom we are celebrating it the week before Ascension Day. And of course we are talking about the Ascension of Jesus into heaven, when he left his disciples physically. And his Ascension holds special importance. It held special importance for the disciples, it held special importance to the Venerable Bede, and it holds special importance for us. The special importance that it holds is that we are all WITNESSES OF HIS ASCENSION.

1. Grounded in the Scriptures
2. Filled with Great Joy

WITNESSES OF HIS ASCENSION – we all are, even though we haven’t seen it with our own eyes, because of the simple truth that we are witnesses grounded in the Scriptures, and Jesus’ Ascension is grounded in the Scriptures also. You would think if you would want people to remember anything you would point to the event itself – the miracle that Jesus was alive, the miracle that he defied gravity and ascended up into heaven. And yet in both cases Jesus didn’t do that, he turned his disciples back to the Scriptures.

For the last couple weeks after Easter we have been looking at where our Easter hope is grounded in. It is grounded in the Scriptures which speak about Jesus. So when Jesus appeared to his disciples in the days following his resurrection he pointed them again and again to the Scriptures – he did it with the women at the tomb, he did it with the disciples on the road to Emmaus, he did it for the disciples in the upper room. It was all there, the proof that Jesus would suffer, die and rise again. And so the next 40 days were a blur to his disciples as he appeared and disappeared, told them to go north to Galilee, then come back down to Jerusalem, but one thing was constant – preparing them for the time he would leave them physically.

Even up until that day the disciples didn’t quite get it, up until the last hours they were still wondering when Jesus was going to make Israel a world power again. It was what they felt should happen. Because even though they were WITNESSES, they were not grounded in the Scriptures. And this section of Scripture brings up a very important point about human nature. They couldn’t understand the Scriptures. Hear what Jesus says, **“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.”** They didn’t understand the Scriptures until Jesus opened their minds. It was the same way with the disciples on the road to Emmaus – Jesus was not recognized by those two disciples until he broke bread, and then **“their eyes were opened and they recognized him.”**

How could this happen other than the fact that as spiritually dead creatures, we cannot by our own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ, our Lord, or come to him? It’s something that’s mentioned time and time again in Scripture, and we give evidence to it by our sinful actions. Where do our sinful actions come from except the sinful nature that dwells inside of us. The sinful nature that does not understand God nor come to him. It is the sinful nature that wants nothing about being a WITNESS TO THE RESURRECTION NOR TO THE ASCENSION. This sinful nature gives way to all sorts of fallacies regarding God and his Word, even for Christians. As Christians, it can be tempting to judge Scripture by how we’re feeling, it can be tempting to look for support for what we believe in Scripture, instead of finding what to believe from Scripture.

Reason inserts itself and says, “If I can reject God, then that means I can accept him too.” Emotions can lead us to believe that God wouldn’t possibly send “innocent” children to hell. Pedigree can lead us to think that only those with the correct interpretation of the Bible (the WELS) will end up in heaven. And yet all of this does not build up the church, but in fact tears it down. It tears us as sinners down. And it’s because our witness is not always grounded in the Scriptures.

But the very same Scriptures that we so often neglect give us the wonderful proclamation. The Scriptures don't just give a solution, they reveal the problem. The Scriptures reveal the problem of sin, and also the declaration of forgiveness. I can stand up here and say to you, "Jesus died for your sins, your sins are forgiven." It is that simple. Our repentance is nothing more than turning from our old sinful ways, it is not earning the forgiveness Jesus won. So it doesn't matter what you're going through, it doesn't matter what you have done, Jesus has risen from the dead as proof that your sins are forgiven. There's no standard of holy living before you receive this, there's no sincere desire involved, your sins are forgiven, whether you believe it or not.

It is this that makes us WITNESSES OF HIS RESURRECTION. The proof of our witness is grounded in the Scriptures, the ascension is grounded in the Scriptures. WE ARE WITNESSES OF HIS ASCENSION, even though we have not seen it with our own eyes, we have seen it through the eyes of Scripture. For just as Jesus pointed his disciples time and time again to Scripture for "**repentance and forgiveness of sins**," so we can point ourselves to the forgiveness that is found in Scripture.

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And Jesus gave his disciples one more promise before he left them. "**I am going to send you what my Father has promised.**" This was an allusion of Pentecost, which would come in another ten days. And then, before Jesus ascended into heaven, he placed out his hands and he blessed them. It wasn't just Jesus hoping they would do just fine, but he gave them a blessing – he gave them the protection and wisdom and comfort from God. "**While Jesus was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven.**"

We might think that as Jesus' ascended into heaven the disciples would be sad, they would be afraid, they wouldn't know what to do. And it's true, Luke records at the beginning of the book of Acts that the disciples were staring up into the sky after the Ascension. But they were not the silly ninnys that we so often take them for. They didn't get mad at God the Father that he was taking Jesus away from them, instead they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem "**with great joy.**"

Now that phrase, "great joy" is a select phrase used only in a few places in all of Scripture. "Joy" is used in a number of places, but the addition of "great" is Luke's way of making us pay attention. These are the few times "great joy" is used in the New Testament. The angel hosts cried out at Jesus' birth, "**I bring you good news of great joy.**" When the women hurried away from the Easter tomb they were, "**afraid yet filled with great joy.**" When Philip proclaimed the gospel to the Gentiles in the book of Acts, "**there was great joy in that city.**" And after the Ascension, "**they returned to Jerusalem with great joy.**"

Now why could the disciples have great joy even after Jesus had just left them? They had great joy because of the blessing which God placed upon them. They had great joy because Jesus had opened the Scriptures to them. They had great joy because Jesus was going to the right hand of the Father to reign for the good of his church. They had great joy because Jesus was going to prepare a place for them and return to take them to be with him. They were filled with great joy because they were WITNESSES OF HIS ASCENSION. This is the great joy they had, and this is why "**they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.**" And this was before the Holy Spirit came upon them with power on Pentecost.

As believers, we are WITNESSES OF HIS ASCENSION. We are WITNESSES OF HIS ASCENSION because we see it in the pages of Holy Scripture. God has opened our eyes to understand Scripture. Scripture which is able to make us “**wise for salvation.**” Because we are witnesses, we too, like the disciples, are filled with joy. Because we too have been blessed by God, we receive the blessing of the Triune God at the end of every worship service. We also know from Scripture that even though Jesus is not with us physically, he is not retired, but he is here with us, right now. We rejoice that God gives us the privilege of sharing his message with others, we share it with our joy. We rejoice in Jesus coming back one day to take us to be with him in heaven, this is what gives us joy.

At our Easter service a couple weeks ago I made the point about the earthquake which changed everything. It was an earthquake that made the fearful joyful. Well, Jesus’ ascension filled his followers with great joy. Jesus’ ascension was his coronation as our prophet, priest and king. Where he took his rightful place, having accomplished everything God the Father set out for him to do. What a moment at which to be present, and you were. You were present at Jesus’ coronation when he not only rose to a throne up in heaven, but rose to a throne in your heart. This is what made the disciples WITNESSES OF THE ASCENSION. This is what made the Venerable Bede a WITNESS OF THE ASCENSION, and that is what makes us WITNESSES OF THE ASCENSION. Rejoice, our Lord has not only risen from the dead, he has ascended and is reigning at the right hand of God the Father for the good of his church. Amen.