

From Doubt To Delight
By Jason Huff
Micah 7:18-20, Jude 1:20-25, Luke 24:36-53

Today's final Scripture reading comes from Luke 24:36-53. Listen now to God's Word. "While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. He 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. 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 Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and 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." 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 worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God."

Milestones are important. They not only tell us where we've been, but where we're going. On our trip a couple of weeks ago to North Carolina, my family traveled hundreds of miles on Interstate 75. It's not a difficult journey, but it sure is a long one. That's why every time we got to a state line, we'd do a countdown when we passed from Michigan to Ohio or Kentucky to Tennessee. I think it meant more to Catha and I than it did to the kids, but that's OK. It gave us a sense of accomplishment; we'd gotten this far.

Today is a milestone for Church of the Covenant. We have studying Jesus through Luke's gospel since December of 2008. He's taught us to love God and one another, to care for the oppressed and poor, to take up the cross and follow Him. We've heard parables of a prodigal son and his forgiving father, and a king who welcomed the poor to his feast when his invited guests wouldn't come. And we've come to *know* Jesus – the miracle worker, the prophet, the sacrifice who died in our stead. Today, we complete our study of Luke. Over the next few weeks, we'll look at Acts, where we see the lives of the disciples radically changed because of the risen Christ. But today is a day of celebration. We've grown as a congregation as we've studied God's message through Luke week by week. Thank you for being a part of this journey.

This week's passage confirms the most important milestone in the history of the world – Jesus' resurrection. We've had hints and sightings, but now Jesus clearly presents Himself to the disciples. And while there is much in this passage we could discuss, there are three key elements we'll look at this week. The first is this: *resurrection is a reality*. The second: *we need to understand doubt to overcome it*. Finally, we'll see *everything begins and ends with worship of the true God*. These themes point our way through the incredible ending of Luke.

So first, let's deal with the core of the passage: *Jesus' resurrection is a reality*. The disciples were just like you and me – they had no frame of reference for resurrection. They saw Jesus resuscitate people, bringing someone back from death, but those people still eventually died. Resurrection – the permanent return to life of a dead man – is another story altogether. Reports have been coming in from all sides – the women, Cleopas, Simon Peter. All of a sudden Jesus is right there, standing in the middle of the disciples. They are freaked out! He's a ghost!

At this point, Jesus does something really important. He shows them that He is not just a spirit floating around but actually flesh and blood. They see the scars and they touch Him. What's more, He asks for something to eat. He could be hungry, I guess, but this is another proof for them...a spirit doesn't do lunch! His words about rising from the dead on the third day explain this incredible new reality to them. Now that He's *done* it, they begin to *get* it.

The modern world has a problem with the resurrection because it's not reproducible. If we can't explain it in terms of repeatable scientific evidence, the world doesn't want to buy it. Now we can't be too hard on those who have a hard time because the disciples did too! They were from an ancient time, sure, but they still knew the major working laws of the universe...the dead don't rise! It takes God-inspired imagination to think that Jesus could return from the grave. God has to be working in our hearts for us to believe that Jesus was perfect, and that because He was without sin, by the Father's authority Jesus had the power to return to life, and not *just* life but life eternal. But that's what we believe. We believe it literally happened.

There are things that the Bible does not ask us to believe literally. The creation story in Genesis 1 and the story of Job are written in Hebrew poetry. The apocalyptic writings of Daniel and Revelation don't point to exact events in the end times. God inspired the authors of the Bible and led them to use literary techniques. Jesus taught in parables. We read the Bible carefully because not everything is meant to be taken literally. But the resurrection is. It is an actual event in space-time history, and it is pivotal that we believe it really happened.

Why? Because salvation depends upon it. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:14, "If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith." He goes on to say that if Christ hasn't been raised, "we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead." And more importantly, he says, "if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all other men."

Simply put, if Jesus wasn't literally raised from the dead, Christianity might seem like a nice idea, but it's just a religion that we can take or leave because it isn't going to get us any closer to God. Without Jesus' resurrection, there's no hope for our resurrection. If the one perfect man can't be resurrected and have eternal life, no one else can either. We can't have a relationship with Him if He didn't come back to life. And if He didn't rise from the dead, He cannot stand in the gap and intercede on our behalf with the Father. The New Testament pivots around a literal resurrection. If it's true, then the rest follows. If it's false, the whole thing falls apart. Because if it didn't happen, then Jesus' own words were untrue and the disciples' later testimony was a sham, and that makes everything in the New Testament unreliable.

If you have problems believing the resurrection, if you want to have faith but this is a sticking point, I encourage you to pray about it. From a human perspective, it seems impossible. But if nothing is impossible with God, then even this is not impossible. And remember, neither Judaism or Christianity ever taught that we would live forever as disembodied spirits with God. Christianity has always been rooted in an eventual bodily resurrection. We believe that Jesus rose from the dead, and we believe that those who trust in Him will also rise from the dead and join Him in eternity. Jesus' resurrection is the one proof in all of the world's belief systems that there is life after death. So take it to heart – Jesus is not dead but alive, and not as a metaphor, but He lives and breathes and reigns over us even now! Countless books have been written about the historical veracity of the resurrection, and if you want to increase your faith on this point, talk to me and I can point you to resources that can help you with your questions.

In fact, let's move on to that part of the equation: doubt. The second theme I see in the passage is that *we need to understand doubt to overcome it*. The disciples are wracked with all sorts of doubts throughout this passage. At first, they doubt because they aren't sure what to make of Jesus' appearance. Then their doubt changes, according to the text, because "of joy and amazement." Jesus eats with them to dispel their doubts, and He goes so far as to explain the Scriptures once again to them to convince them. Jesus wants to get rid of any lingering uncertainty in their minds.

If moving from doubt to belief is so important, I think we need to understand doubt. It actually comes in a couple of forms, both of which we see in the passage. The first kind of doubt is the one that we typically think of, and it's the intellectual doubt we've already talked about a little bit. It's where the facts presented to us don't fit into our knowledge of the world. If I told you that I was out with Phil Mickelson on Monday and beat him at a round of golf, you'd have every reason to doubt it. Anybody who's seen me play golf knows that my score for 9 holes is what Phil Mickelson hits for all 18! It doesn't fit the facts. The disciples started with intellectual doubts and Jesus dealt with them. The proof was in the seeing and touching.

But what's more important for us, I think, is understanding that not all doubt is intellectual doubt. A lot of our doubt is actually emotional doubt. Sometimes we use intellectual arguments to hide from emotional doubts that are what really bother us about the resurrection. Now there are at least two kinds of emotional doubt for us about the resurrection. The first one is one of cost. The second is one of value.

Let me explain what this means. The first emotional doubt is the doubt of cost. If I believe that the resurrection is true, that means that what Jesus said is true and I have to pay attention to it. Not only do I have to pay attention to it, I have to embrace it. Jesus says I have to give up my own life and my own desires and follow God's desires instead. The cost of discipleship is high. First, there are sins I must give up – if I'm a liar, I must defeat the lies with truth; if I'm filled with lust, I must deny it to embrace purity; if I hate my neighbor, I must put that hate to death and love him instead. I give up the sins I once loved. And when that's done, I must give up my very life to serve God. Jesus frees me from sin so that I can freely choose to serve Him. If the resurrection is true, this is the logical outcome. Emotionally, it's easier to doubt the resurrection than to die to self. While the disciples don't display this kind of doubt, it springs up many times, and Paul deals with it in his letters to the Corinthian church.

The second emotional doubt is the one that the disciples *do* show in this passage once they overcome their intellectual doubt, and that's the doubt of value. If the doubt of cost is that the price of discipleship is too high, the doubt of value is that the resurrection is too good, of too much ultimate value, to be true. If Jesus was resurrected, then no matter how much I've sinned, I can be forgiven. If Jesus was resurrected, then I no longer have to strive to please God because, through Jesus, the gap between the Father and myself has been bridged. Even if in my belief I give my earthly life away in service to God, it still in no way compares to the incredible gift of eternal life that Jesus bestows. It's too good to believe that Jesus will not only live forever, but through the Holy Spirit live within me and regenerate me from the inside out.

For the disciples, it was too good to be true because their friend they witnessed die a torturous death was standing with them, alive and well. For us, it's too good to be true because we feel we are unworthy to receive the benefits of Jesus' resurrection. Our sins are too heinous; our depravity runs too deep to be transformed. Our whole lives, we've been told that nothing comes for free; there's always strings attached. To be forgiven and set free just because God has been gracious to us is too good to hope for. That's the doubt of value.

The disciples became aware of their doubts and overcame them, and we can do the same. Being honest with ourselves about our belief and our doubts is important. Our world is full of doubt about Christianity, but little of it is honest. For example, many today doubt Christ because they doubt Christians, because people who have called themselves Christians have made serious errors in judgment, sometimes with huge consequences, throughout history. But this is a false dichotomy. That some who have worn the name "Christian" have been poor disciples does not make the reality of the resurrection any less real. If being a Christian meant being absolutely perfect in this life, we'd all be hypocrites. But Christ rose, as today's passage says, so that repentance and forgiveness of sins in His name would be preached. Jesus promises forgiveness and eternal life to those who repent and believe. That's the reality. So let me wind up this section by saying this: learn where you have doubts and why you doubt, where you struggle. Ask God to show them to you, to shore up the leaks in your faith and flush the lies out. Because when we have mastery over our doubts, the fire of the Spirit will burn in us, and there will be no water of disbelief to quench the flames.

Let's hit our final point: *it all begins and ends with worship of the true God*. Luke starts with the announcement of John the Baptist's coming while his father does his priestly duty in the temple. It ends with the disciples praising God at the temple. It's a literary technique that shows us that the worship of God is at the core of who we are as believers. But not only does it begin and end with worship, through worship the nature of the true God is revealed.

At the beginning of Luke, we read that John will go before the LORD to prepare the people for His coming. At this point, all we know is that the LORD is the one true God. Perhaps John's work will prepare people for God's intervention. But by the end, we see that God Himself has come down, and Jesus *is* God. As we learn, God is triune in His very nature. Jesus is the Son of the everlasting Father. The Father, the Spirit, and the Son live in harmony and perfect oneness as God of the universe. Now how is it we know this? It's because of what we see in the next to last verse of Luke – "While [Jesus] was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. *Then they worshiped him* and returned to Jerusalem with great joy."

Why is this so important? Jesus is personally worshipped for the first time. It is the climax of everything leading up to it. It is the end result of Jesus' earthly ministry. Remember that Judaism was very clear about one thing: there is no god but the God of Israel. He is known by four letters – YHWH in Hebrew, which is translated in most English Bibles as the LORD (in all capital letters) out of respect for His name. We don't know exactly how God's proper name is pronounced because the Jews wouldn't say it for fear of Him and the original Hebrew text didn't have vowels. What we do know is that the LORD is *the* God. Of all the sins Israel committed, none is mentioned more often in the Old Testament than idolatry. In fact, every other sin is in some fashion related back to idolatry – placing something else before God. In the desert with Satan, Jesus fought temptation by quoting Deuteronomy 6: "Worship the Lord and serve Him *only*." In Exodus and Deuteronomy, God gives Himself the name *Jealous*. To worship anyone or anything else is an abomination. It was the chief of offenses.

If that's the case, then Jesus must be God in the flesh. In Isaiah 42:8, God says, "I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another." When the disciples worshipped Jesus, either they were committing idolatry or they were worshipping the one true God. There's no other option. We cannot fully wrap our heads around the Trinity; how God can be three unique individuals and yet totally and completely and truly one is not something that we can totally fathom. But for these Jewish men and women to worship Jesus meant they believed that He Himself is God. We too are called to worship Jesus, to acknowledge Him as Savior and Lord, the forgiver of sins, the one who makes a way to the Father for us, the promised Immanuel, "God with us."

And just as the disciples show us, worship is a constant for the Christian. The disciples stayed continually at the temple praising God. While that was their first response, eventually they were called into the world to spread the good news of Christ's resurrection. But continual worship never stopped. We are called to live our lives in service to God – that doesn't mean we pray every minute or sing a worship song every hour, but it means that as Paul says in Romans 12:1, our bodies are offered to God as a living sacrifice, which is our spiritual act of worship. Our lives should be our gift to God each and every day.

The resurrection is real. Doubts can be defeated. Worship of Jesus our Savior and Lord is the proper response to His perfect gift. These are the final messages of Luke's gospel. There are more issues that Luke addresses – the coming Holy Spirit and the preaching of Jesus' message – but we will see them again as we enter the book of Acts next week. For now, know that Jesus has conquered the grave. It's not too good to be true. Salvation is the new reality for all who repent and believe in Jesus. For this, we praise and glorify Him – our Savior, our Lord, our God – forevermore. Amen!