

## THE SAME STORY FIVE WAYS

Acts 1. 1-11

Ephesians 1. 15-23

Luke 24. 44-53

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

On three different occasions before his death, our Lord taught his disciples about what was to come. He didn't leave much up for debate or interpretation either. Just after Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah, Christ bluntly told the group that 'the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.'<sup>1</sup> Despite this very clear teaching, the disciples never seem to quite get it. Twice more, our Lord has to remind them that the future they imagine – power, privilege and prestige – is not what God has in mind for the great reversal and the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Despite three clearly articulated opportunities for the disciples to hear and understand what was to come, they each seem totally caught off guard when Jesus is rejected by the powers-that-be, undergoes great suffering on the cross and is killed. In fact they seem so clueless that when it all happens, their only reaction is to run and hide. For three days, they hide in fear. Once the Passover Festival is over, they begin to plan their next steps. Two of them, one named Cleopas and the other unnamed disciple decide to head home. At some point on the seven-mile journey back to Emmaus, the resurrected Christ comes alongside the two dejected disciples. He listens as they talk about all that had happened, and how they had hoped that their Lord might have been the Messiah; but those hopes were dashed, now that he has been rejected, crucified and has died.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Lk 9. 22.

Here again, Jesus takes the opportunity to teach them about God's plan for salvation. Beginning with Moses, Christ uses all the prophets and the psalms to (for a fourth time) show them how his rejection, suffering, death *and resurrection* were all necessary components of the restoration of the world. For the fourth time, our Lord shows them that God's ways are not our ways; and that love, grace, and mercy (not power and might) are the way to redemption. Still, despite a whole day of walking alongside the yet unrecognisable Jesus, Cleopas and his companion do not realise that he is the Christ until they stop for dinner and he breaks the bread.

Off they went, sprinting back to Jerusalem to share the Good News that the Lord was, in fact, alive! Back in that Upper Room, with the door locked behind them out of fear, they told of their encounter with the risen Jesus; and suddenly, he appears before them again. With a mix of terror, confusion and belief, they listen as Christ, now for the *fifth time*, recounts what he had told them all along, 'that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem'.<sup>2</sup>

In Luke's gospel, it is with this fifth teaching on the mission of our Lord that his ministry on earth finally comes to an end. After five distinct opportunities to hear that his life, death, and resurrection were all a part of the larger plan of salvation, it will be up to the disciples to figure out what that means going forward. They won't be alone, however; for God has promised to send help. In Luke, it is called 'the power from on high'. In the second Ascension narrative from the book Acts, it is called 'the Holy Spirit'. In the gospel of John, it is called 'the Advocate'.<sup>3</sup> In spite of the different names given, the promise is that someone else will come in the place of Jesus to lead the disciples in truth; to guide them as witnesses of the gospel; to encourage them in their proclamation; and to help them interpret the Good News

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Lk 24. 47.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Jn 16. 7-11.

that they were unable to hear and comprehend (that God's plan of redemption came to life through the cross and grave).

With this final teaching complete, Christ leads the disciples out of the city and to the mountain village of Bethany, where he offered one final blessing before being carried up into heaven. When one does a bit of biblical exegesis, things get complicated here. We believe that the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts were written by the same author; and yet the details of the Ascension that are given in the two texts are different.

In Luke's gospel, the Ascension seems to happen on Easter Day. In the book of Acts, it is said to happen forty days after the resurrection. In Luke, the disciples run back to the city with great joy. In Acts, the disciples are left stupefied by the sight of our Lord's Ascension; and two men robed in white have to motivate the crowd to return to Jerusalem. In Luke's gospel, they return to the Temple to praise God. In the book of Acts, they gather in a room (perhaps the Upper Room) and await the Holy Spirit. Both scripture lessons are appointed for Ascension Day, so what are we to do? Do we ignore the differences? Do we admit them? Or do we attempt to explain them away?

I'm one who believes that the variety of the biblical story offers richness and depth. After all, Jesus had to teach the disciples about his death and resurrection at least *five different times*. What is constant in the Ascension stories is this: firstly, that Christ had to return to the Father; secondly, that the disciples would not be left alone; and thirdly, that the Spirit's task was to turn disciples into apostles and evangelists. The good news of the Ascension, whether it happened on day one or day forty, is that the gospel could now be spread from Jerusalem to all of Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

As inheritors of the promised gift of the Holy Spirit, Ascension Day is our chance to give thanks for fullness of God's plan for salvation – from the Annunciation to the Ascension – as we await the Spirit's arrival with power and might in just ten short days.

Amen.