

From Bethany to Jerusalem
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
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Luke 24:44-53
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I want you to think for a moment about significant events in your life. I'll share a few of mine: a driver's license (second try!), high school, college, and seminary graduations, an ordination day, a wedding day, the birth of our first child, the funerals of grandparents, just to name a few.

There are commonalities in each of these experiences. I remember it taking a while for the reality of these events to sink in. You mean I can really drive by myself? You mean there's no more homework or papers? You mean somebody's going to actually pay me to do something I've been trained to do, and that I'm actually going to be able to meet those expectations? You mean she said, "yes?" You mean we created this human being, and like, we're responsible, totally responsible for her entire wellbeing? You mean my grandparents are really gone?

News like this, whether joyful or happy, sudden or expected, takes a long time to make sense of, to live with, and to become equipped for.

And these experiences are so full of collective wisdom. Ten and two. Mirrors, seatbelt, locks. First gear, second gear, third, fourth, and then fifth (if you are lucky!). States and capitals; debits and credits; Hebrew, Greek, and Latin; manners at the table and in conversation; character traits and lingering memories; life skills for every situation.

When we reflect on the magnitude of life events, we can become overwhelmed with all we've learned, and all that's been shared with us.

And of course, special events are filled with food. Try as I may, drive-thru food will never be as good as it was the first time I got to be the driver and pass the McDonald's bags around to other passengers. Cakes, covered dishes, cocktail peanuts, roast beef sandwich stations, those little tiny ham and cheese sandwiches, punch and cookies...I could go on forever. Meaningful events somehow always wrap themselves around tables. Sometimes these tables are formal, sometimes they are spontaneous, but they are always there.

The events that shape our lives – it's hard to put words to them; they flood our memories; and they are filled with tables full of good people and good food.

Now, imagine if you can, that you are a disciple of Jesus. And you've just experienced a series of events that make all of the above examples, which are really significant, seem insignificant.

Over the past few years, you've met a man who has changed your entire perspective about the world: he's shown you how to love God and love neighbor in the purest kind of way. You've seen miracles; you've seen lives transformed; you've seen social stigmas erased; you've seen tables filled with diversity; you've felt scared and safe, you've experienced joy and sorrow; you've had so little, and yet you've had all you ever needed and more. And oh by the way, over the course of a short time, (Luke estimates a few days), you've seen this mentor tried and executed, and you've heard tell of his resurrection – an empty tomb. And just this very moment, he's appeared to you. He's let you poke at

his wounds, hug him, and touch him to verify he's no ghost, but made of flesh and bones. And he's even devoured some broiled fish right in front of you. And he's done all of this like it's no big deal.

There's been no time to grieve. No time to celebrate. No time to process. Not even time to stop by Food Lion and pick up a bucket of chicken and some Turkey Hill lemonade to welcome him properly for Sunday lunch. There's only time to be present. There's only time to listen. There's only time to respond.

And I want you to imagine you are a disciple standing in the presence of the risen Christ. And I want you think about how his words would sound. This is the setting of today's reading from Luke 24:44-53

Hear now these good words:

⁴⁴ Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." ⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶ and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah^[a] is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses^[b] of these things. ⁴⁹ And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

⁵⁰ Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. ⁵¹ While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.^[c] ⁵² And they worshiped him, and^[d] returned to Jerusalem with great joy; ⁵³ and they were continually in the temple blessing God.^[e]

If I allow myself to imagine I'm a disciple, here's how today's words speak to me, and move me. All at once, I am flooded with the collective memories of a year-long ministry journey with Jesus. And I find myself both humble and confident. Did we really do all of that, witness all of that, take part in all of that? Wow! Yes, we did.

And as Jesus reminds me of the law, I instantly remember his many lectures and conversations – I don't see it as a stilled set of documents, but rather a living, breathing spirit of how to live in God's covenant. And as Jesus reminds me of the prophet's words, the ones who foretold of how God's covenant would be restored, my memories piece together that the life of Jesus has been the fulfilment of those things. And as we sing and recite the psalms, our instructions of praise, I am overcome with joy as I praise God in the presence of one who is God: the risen Christ!

And as Jesus eats among us, my mind drifts back to hundreds of makeshift tables bearing spontaneous cornucopias: sardines and saltines; stone soup; water made into wine; bread and cup given with sincerity. And I recall a thousand strangers who became my sisters and brothers, if only for a moment, joined in a spirit of love and hospitality and fullness.

Jesus tells me I'm a witness, equipped to tell the story of what's happened. And he's given me specific instruction to go to Jerusalem – the place where we all thought it ended, will actually be where it all begins – And there we are to wait to receive instructions for what's next. We are to receive God's power from on high, in the same way as Jesus did.

And then Jesus leads us to a familiar place, Bethany. It's our little sanctuary. It's the place where we retreated from the crowds, and from the work we did each day. We'd sit in the cool grass under shady trees, resting our tired backs against sturdy trunks. There, we were freed to be ourselves – to be silly, or worried, or overwhelmed, or vulnerable. We got to be his friends, and he ours. We could ask questions of him without fear of rebuke, and every once in a while, he told us things he wouldn't tell anyone else. And we dreamed of what the world could be. And each morning, we left Bethany in search of a new Jerusalem, the one of God's choosing, and the one of our own makings.

And that's where he left us. One final chat in our favorite place. And the work he started now left for us to complete.

And I think if I were a disciple, here's what I would have felt on that first Ascension Day: I would have felt the freedom of a sixteen-year-old ready to drive; I would have felt the sorrow of one who has lost a mentor; I would have felt the fullness of one who's known a mother's love and been the recipient of a grandmother's wisdom; I would have felt the hope of a graduate ready to tackle their new calling; I would have felt the comradery of ten friends, not to mention the sisters our story fails to mention, all called to follow the Christ; and I would have felt the presence of God.

Of course, all of these feelings are easy for me to imagine. They are easy for me to imagine, because the disciples did as Jesus instructed. They left Bethany. And they gathered at tables all throughout Jerusalem. And each time they broke bread, they resurrected the spirit and presence of Jesus, who told them on Maundy Thursday, "I'll not eat this bread again until my kingdom is fulfilled." Little did the disciples know, Jesus' next fulfilling meal would be in a crowded room on Sunday evening, as he commissioned and blessed the disciples, first for Bethany, and then for Jerusalem.

And of course, all of these feelings are easy for me to imagine on this Ascension Day, because we too have our own Bethany in which to dream about our own Jerusalem. Sardis is our Bethany. And at God's table, we too, can be ourselves. We too can practice the kind of radical hospitality that Jesus offered others. And we too can dream of our own Jerusalem, a Charlotte that lives according to God's good purpose, rather than in spite of it. And Sardis can be our sanctuary. A place to be inspired, renewed, and empowered to go out and be God's people. And a place to come back to each week, as we celebrate, mourn and support one another in the choppiness, the ups and downs of helping to move our community from what can be to what will be.

Friends, on this Ascension Sunday, we sit in Bethany. And come next Sunday, the winds of Pentecost will blow into Jerusalem. May God give us the courage to open our sails and catch those winds, that the Spirit may fall fresh upon us in the way it fell upon the apostles of old. And may that spirit embolden us to be active witnesses of the Christ who greets us in this place. Amen.