

*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."*

<sup>45</sup> *Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.* <sup>46</sup> *He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day,* <sup>47</sup> *and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.* <sup>48</sup> *You are witnesses of these things.* <sup>49</sup> *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."*

<sup>50</sup> *When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them.* <sup>51</sup> *While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven.* <sup>52</sup> *Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.* <sup>53</sup> *And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God. (Luke 24:44-53)*

### Rejoice to Say Good-bye

Do you ever look forward to saying good-bye? Some people say that houseguests are like fresh fish – both stink after three days. But I think most of us want to spend time with people we love and find it hard to say good-bye. In about a month, high school seniors will be graduating. Many of them are going to go away to college in the fall. When you drop them off and drive away, how will you feel? Will you, maybe, shed a tear or two? It's natural, isn't it? So why didn't Jesus' disciples feel that way? In our gospel lesson this evening, Luke tells us about their good-bye to Jesus – his ascension. After this moment, he wasn't going to be visibly with them anymore. They would probably have those moments when they thought, "Oh, I have to tell Jesus about that!" and then realized they couldn't have that conversation with him, at least not in the same way. Yet, after that dramatic good-bye, Luke tells us, "**Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.**"

Of course, we weren't there that day and we didn't have the three years they spent, talking to Jesus and walking and eating with him. But we do have a relationship with our Lord. His ascension does mean that we don't get to see him with our physical eyes, either. We don't have his number on our cell phones. We can't text him and expect to hear back. Yet, God never presents Jesus' ascension as something to feel sad about. As we go back in our minds and hearts to that spot near Bethany, **rejoice to say good-bye.**

#### I.

**Rejoice because we understand why he left.** If you send your kids away to college, it's sad to see them go. Even with texting and calling and emailing, it's not the same as seeing them at breakfast and at supper. Yet, you are happy for them because you know this is what they need to do to finish growing up and to start life as an adult. When they graduate, you know the possibility exists that they will take a job and move away – and you understand why that has to happen. It doesn't take away the sadness. But it does give us perspective. In the complicated place that is the human heart, we can be sad and we can rejoice at the same time.

Jesus' disciples certainly wanted to spend more time with him. But Jesus told them that his ascension had a purpose and that allowed them to rejoice. They weren't like the parents whose child goes off to college. They were like the kids who get dropped off at a university far from home and then watch their parents drive away. It's scary and they might shed a tear, too – although they probably wouldn't admit it. But it's also exciting because this is the next big step. Jesus' departure was the next big step in the disciples' ministry. It was necessary for them to be able to do the work that he had recruited them to do.

Forty days before it happened, on the first Easter evening – which is where our reading starts – Jesus said, "**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.**" Now, he was speaking specifically about his resurrection. But Luke puts his resurrection and his ascension together so that we can see that they're connected. All this was part of a plan that God conceived of before the world began. God prepped for that plan all through the Old Testament. He even gave the basic outlines for it there. Now, he was taking the next big step toward putting it into place. This wasn't the last step – we'll hear about that a week from Sunday. But this was an absolutely essential part of the plan.

What was the plan? Jesus said, **“Repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in [Jesus’] name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.”** That’s what Jesus called and trained these men to do. That’s why on the first Easter evening he gave them the Holy Spirit and opened their minds to understand the Old Testament. That’s why ten days after his ascension, he poured the Holy Spirit out on them in power. Their mission was to call the whole world to repent and then to offer all people the good news of forgiveness through Jesus.

That is the heart and soul of our work, even today. Do we still understand that? A number of years ago, I ran across something that a pastor in a different church body wrote. He noted that the topic of sin was very important in the past, like at the time of the Reformation. People were very concerned about their standing with God. Sin and grace were burning issues. But he went on to say that today, that’s just not important to people. So he suggested that the real issues the church needs to deal with today are alienation and how alone people feel, and all the terrible consequences that happen because of isolation. He rightly noted that focusing on those things naturally leads to all kinds of projects and attempts to help people with those kinds of issues.

Is that true? Do we need to move on from what someone once called “the Lutheran obsession with justification” and address more pressing needs in people’s lives today? Well, that’s not what Jesus told the disciples when he gave them their marching orders. God’s plan all through the Old Testament, God’s plan from before he made the world, was for repentance and forgiveness of sins to be preached to the whole world, starting in Jerusalem. Now, that doesn’t mean there’s no place for addressing alienation and all the terrible consequences it brings into people’s lives – things like substance abuse and anxiety and poverty. But the heart of our message is still that truth that you and I are sinners who need forgiveness.

Why do we need that forgiveness? Because God’s law has not been repealed. Sin is disobedience to God’s commands. It’s a crime in God’s courtroom and it brings punishment: death and hell. The truth is, all the pain and sorrow of this life, all alienation and anxiety and substance abuse and poverty and sickness come from one source: sin. That doesn’t mean that it’s a sin to be poor or to suffer from anxiety. But sin causes all those things. They can’t be healed until sin is healed. You and I are sinners who deserve nothing but death and hell. But God saved us. He sent Jesus to live in our place. Then he counted Jesus’ holy life as ours. He sent Jesus to suffer hell itself and die in our place. He counted his payment as ours, too. Then Jesus rose to tell us our debt is paid in full. Our sin is gone. We will live with him forever in a perfect world without any of those terrible things that come from sin.

You know what? That was always God’s plan, too. The whole Old Testament – the law of Moses, the prophets and the psalms – taught one simple truth. Jesus said it like this: **“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.”** Jesus left us to put that plan into motion. He ascended so that he can direct our efforts to reach the world with that good news. Jesus sits at the right hand of God and in that position of power and glory, he works every time we share that good news. It’s not up to us to convince anybody. Our job is just to share. Jesus changes hearts. And he promises that while we’re down here, he will watch over us and hear our prayers and guide our lives.

He calls us to reflect that gospel in our lives of faith. So we do try to help with all those real personal and societal issues that plague our country today. But all our efforts are under his control and work according to his plan. That is why we are here! Rejoice because our work is part of that plan that God has been carrying out for thousands of years! Rejoice because Jesus is with you and he will not let his plan fail.

## II.

Of course, his plan doesn’t end here, at least, not with life as we know it. All the sharing we do, all the service we do are just stops along the way. The plan ends when he comes back. That is what makes his departure the source of true joy. When we drop our kids off at college and drive away, we know and they know that we’re going to see each other again. And we look forward to that. In the days right before a big break, we can’t wait for them to get home. But, of course, in this world, we don’t really *know* that we’ll see each other again. A terrible car accident could prevent that. But when it comes to seeing Jesus, there is no doubt. He has promised to return, and that promise is absolutely certain.

In the Acts lesson, an angel made that clear to the disciples. There Luke describes in more detail what happened that day. Jesus was lifted up into the air and then a cloud hid him from their sight. The disciples had seen a lot of miracles over the last three years, but this was one of the greatest. They stood there for a while

staring up into sky, trying to see where he had gone. That's when the angel asked them, "**Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.**"

Jesus will come back, just as they saw him go. He won't appear secretly. It won't just be in a vision or a dream. He will physically and visibly return. In truth, the whole world will see him come. He will be at the head of the army of angels. When he comes, he will finally cleanse all sin and sorrow out of this life. He will remake this world and then all the sorrows, all the alienation, all the hurts that we try to help with here will be solved forever. All the impossible problems in our society and in our own lives will finally be cured. That doesn't mean we don't work on that stuff right now. We do. But we understand that all that we do now is just a band aid. Only Jesus can really fix what's wrong with this world. He will do that when he comes back.

We rejoice when we think of that. The more life hurts, the more we long for his return. In the complicated place that is the human heart we can hurt and rejoice in Jesus at the same time. The joy of knowing he is coming gives us the energy to serve him now. We share the good news because we're looking forward to seeing him again. We address the hurts in the lives of people all around us because Jesus has given us the ultimate cure to all hurt and sorrow and we want those people to rejoice while they wait for him to bring that final cure. We strive to make our society a better and more just and merciful place because we want to reflect an attitude that shows that we are blessed in the Lord.

You and I weren't with the disciples when they had to say good-bye to Jesus. But we live the way they had to after that – without seeing Jesus with our physical eyes. I would like to see Jesus. I've often wished I could bring him with me to the hospital. I've often wished I could ask him why people I serve have to suffer so that I could relay the answer. I've often wished I could just sit and talk with him and have him make sense of my life. We don't get to do that yet. But we will. He is coming back. That promise is what gives us joy even when life hurts, even when we don't understand why. So today, as we look back on the day Jesus ascended, **rejoice to say goodbye. Rejoice because we will say hello again.** Amen.