

“Ascension as Transition”

Luke 24: 44-53

May 13, 2018

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For many of us, this story about Jesus’ ascension found in Luke is rather extraordinary...maybe even a bit bizarre. It is easy to get engrossed in details like: “How far up did Jesus actually go?” You could spend hours just trying to make sense of the physics involved in this departure.

But to get hung-up there so would take away from the rich significance that Jesus’ ascension held for his disciples, the early church, and for us today. Just as Kyle mentioned on Easter morning about the resurrection, the gospel writers found themselves in new territory, trying to describe and write about things unparalleled—marvelous things that words really can’t capture perfectly. But while words cannot fully describe adequately all that was witnessed, the ascension as it happened was an event that evoked incredibly joy and spiritual reassurance, and resulted in worship followed by a powerful faith movement—all of which were well recorded and that we can still see in action today.

For Jesus, ascension was not a matter of theatrics or spectacle. It had to do with the very significant task of transitioning well—connecting the past, present and future for a divine purpose. In a real way, Jesus is making a transfer here—transferring shared power and ministry into the hands of his followers and the church.

You certainly don’t need me to tell you that transition or absences can be incredibly stress inducing. This was just as true in Jesus’ day as it is in ours. If you search scholarly archives or the web, you will see that there have been extensive research studies conducted about the various effects of transition on stress level and work productivity, as well as factors that help reduce stress and facilitate smooth, successful transitions. Leading universities such as Stanford have dedicated HR resources, online toolkits, and personnel to assist their students and employees with transitions, changes, and transfers following well-researched step-by-step transfer and transition models (<https://cardinalatwork.stanford.edu/manage-lead/transition-exit/transfer-employment>).

While Jesus most certainly did not occupy himself with journal articles or conferences about such topics or go online to utilize HR tool-kits, it is incredibly obvious that he put great care and intentionality into his departure to ensure that he provided closure to his own earthly ministry and opened the doors for the church to take its place in continuing his work of salvation and restoration. What is not surprising, but no less amazing is that Jesus' transition follows the wisdom and methods that have taken years to develop within today's business world! Even Jesus' leaving...his ascending...was a gift and work of love and healing, as well as a model worth following.

For those of you who are teachers, you know the excruciating effort and time it takes to prepare well for a substitute teacher to manage your class in your absence...especially if you want there to be any continuity or real teaching happening. Many teachers I have visited with over the years say that preparing for substitutes can be so burdensome that it isn't worth it unless it is absolutely necessary. So Jesus' actions in this text and the promised gift of the Holy Spirit to follow should not be taken for granted!

Just this week I starting visiting with someone about today's passage and it led to us contrasting the transition Jesus facilitated with her own job's tumultuous beginning. She told me that it was chaotic at the start because she did not receive any actual orientation. There was no one else in office that knew the details of her job. Everything, including small tasks, seemed to be cumbersome and time consuming because she couldn't locate things and there were several computer programs she had to learn on her own using online tutorials or just trial and error. She learned what was expected or needed of her by people's requests and filled in the dots herself. I imagine several of you have experienced situations like this! Some of you may be in the very midst of a challenging transition due to similar dynamics, disorganized workplaces, or high turnover in your work environment. It's times like these that you wish others were as intentional about transitions as Jesus proves to be in this passage.

Join me in examining Jesus' ascension as transition. I will be using some of the language from the transition/transfer model at Stanford to help connect the intention and brilliance of what Jesus was up to in these verses.

To start, Jesus provides a PROJECT STATUS UPDATE before he goes—making it clear where things stand in God’s cosmic plan of redemption.

First, he reminds them of what he has already taught them about God’s plans and methods and he recalls the promises and prophecies about salvation and the Messiah in all parts of the Hebrew Scriptures, which their faith tradition has been carrying and teaching for years. He practically lists them out for them and leaves no stone unturned. Note, this is not typical Jesus fashion! Jesus frequently taught through parables, which were highly engaging and relatable, but not particularly clear cut or prescriptive. Here Jesus is very clear and very specific...helping the disciples to recognize Jesus’ and their own place in this very large and long salvation endeavor that began thousands of years before Jesus’ earthly ministry began. God has been busy for a long time, and although Jesus is departing, they can be sure that God is going to see this project through.

Then, Jesus does something astonishing and amazing. In his own sort of TRANSITION PLAN, “he opens their minds so they could truly understand the scriptures” that he had just pointed out to them (Luke 24: 45). Here, in both an act of divine power and divine love, Jesus connects the dots for his disciples and removes any barriers that might keep them from seeing and understanding how Christ’s death and resurrection were truly within God’s purposes, and not a tragic miscalculation or failure. I think that as much as giving them insight or removing confusion, Jesus also diminished fears, grief, and false preconceptions about the Messiah that could keep them from perceiving clearly who Jesus is as the Son of God. He has taught them for years, and now he ensures that they really get the big picture, leaving no opportunity for error.

In his TRANSITION PLAN, he also reviews and highlights a clear and focused *mission statement* to guide them into their *first action steps*: “repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations” (Luke 24:47, NRSV). In the Message translation the statement reads like this: “that a total life-change through the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed in his name.”

In great wisdom, Jesus doesn’t assign a bunch of unfamiliar tasks or a huge to-do list off the bat—he gives them a *clear starting focus* and instructs them to *start right where they are*, in Jerusalem. And talk about providing *transitional support and equipping resources*—they aren’t simply sent to a symposium to hear a power-point lecture on how to

evangelize, they are told to wait where they are “to be clothed in power from on high.” (Luke 24:49b) I don’t know about you, but I certainly have never been offered anything like this at the onset of any major transition or as a part of any orientation in school or work! (We will get to hear all about the sending and receiving of this power—the Holy Spirit—next week on Pentecost Sunday). The divine help that Jesus offered them when he opened their understanding of Scripture is now being promised on an ongoing basis—God is planning to perpetually equip them (and now us) for the mission upon which they are being sent.

Finally, Jesus coordinates a FAREWELL GATHERING to provide definitive closure to his disciples and to help the shift from the past to the future. Jesus didn’t ascend immediately after the resurrection. Over a period of 40 days, Jesus appeared to the disciples in various groupings and in various places to prove to them that he was alive (Acts 1:3). Just as the Israelites spent 40 years in the wilderness to learn how to trust and follow God before entering the promised land, and just as Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness being tempted by Satan and preparing to begin his earthly ministry, Jesus gives the remaining 11 disciples and his other close followers a 40 day period to learn anew how to trust God and to adjust to following him without his constant presence. Now, Jesus is giving them his love and farewell and leaving no question in their minds that his earthy ministry is complete and that their time to lead and witness to what they have learned, heard, and seen has begun. They gathered just outside of Jerusalem near a place they had spent many memorable days with Jesus before his crucifixion—Bethany—the home place of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha.

Instead of saying a simple goodbye, in priestly fashion he raises his arms and blesses them. But what stands out to me in this blessing/departure is that he didn’t offer a blessing and then ascend. No, he continues blessing them as he is carried up into heaven. In fact, the text never says that the act of blessing ever stops! I believe that Christ is still blessing us—this act of ascending and blessing go together, with blessing never ceasing. And as Christ blesses us until his return, Christ continues to equip believers and the church today through his Holy Spirit to “open minds” to scripture and to join the mission of sharing the good news of repentance and forgiveness across all human-made borders and barriers such as ethnicity, gender, social status, country of origin, sexual orientation, age, and education, etc.

Let me tell you about Hallie Ferguson. Our youth and I met her a few weeks ago during youth group. When she was 7 years old, she was

placed in foster care due to parental neglect. When the CPS worker arrived, she had about 5 minutes to gather some things and put them in a trash bag. When she was in her second foster home, there was an elderly woman across the street who got to know Hallie and gave her a Bible with a post-it note inside the cover with Psalm 27:10 highlighted on it. That verse says: “Though my mother and father forsake me, the Lord will receive me” (NIV). As she grew up, that verse and that act of kindness never left her. She says “it has stuck ever since”

(<http://www.bagsoflovecharity.org/about/>)

I believe she had her “mind opened to scripture!” Jesus’ work that began so long ago carried on through the hands and feet of an elderly believer in her life as a little girl. With some time and age, this seed of scripture clarity and a sense of belonging to God brought her another step into the transitional work of Jesus—to be bearers of God’s love and forgiveness and restoration. She describes being 29, buying 2 gym bags online, and suddenly recalling her experience of stuffing a trash bag. This led her on a journey to begin a non-profit nearby in Lufkin. If you Google “Bags of Love,” you will find many similar ministries. But hers is the only one that has bags made for each child with her beloved Scripture reference: Psalm 27:10. She took her own life story, a powerful insight and revelation from Scripture that transformed her sense of self worth, and joined Jesus’ mission in her own community. Now housed in her home church, her non-profit organization has delivered over 800 bags to foster children in our area in the past year alone

(<http://www.ktre.com/story/38154316/lufkin-womans-non-profit-organization-helps-foster-care-children-across-east-texas>),

and just a few weeks ago our youth collaborated with the youth at Westminster Presbyterian, with generous donations from many of you, to fill 22 more bags in just one hour! Each bag was filled with a blanket, stuffed animal, activities, and toiletries selected for a child by the youth filling the bag, but each bag was also equipped with a hand-written or hand-drawn card—a blessing from the youth that prepared the bag. This was our youths’ addition...their own way of spreading Jesus’ continued blessing in a tangible way.

The ascension of Jesus transitioned the disciples from followers of a Rabbi to true worshippers of the Christ that reigns as King of all, and their confusion, disappointment and grief in relation to Jesus’ crucifixion were now replaced with indescribable joy, that along with the Holy Spirit, fueled what sociologist Rodney Stark calls a “revitalization movement” across the Greco-Roman world. In describing the effects of the early church over a few hundred years he says: “Christianity revitalized life in Greco-Roman cities by providing new norms and new

kinds of social relationships able to cope with many urgent problems. To cities filled with the homeless and impoverished, [it] offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, [it] offered an immediate basis for attachment. To cities filled with orphans and widows, [it] provided a new and expanded sense of family. To cities torn by violent ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity.” (*The Rise of Christianity*, p. 161)

May we be encouraged today by the Christ that not only came that God might dwell among us, died and rose to undo the powers of death and to wipe away any barriers to the fullness of life with God, but that also prepares, equips and blesses us continually to carry on his work, just as he did his disciples and early followers.

The needs around us are great—the need for hope, justice, healing, and belonging are as real as they ever have been in our world so full of hatred, violence, greed and pollution. I pray we can go out today filled with renewing joy and transforming praise and love—for this is Christ’s gift to us today as well as the very gift our world needs.

Amen.