**Luke 24:44-53** May 13, 2018

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*Luke 24:44[Jesus] 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.” 45Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. 46He told them, “This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, 47and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. 48You are witnesses of these things. 49I 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.”*

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

Dear Friends in Christ,

**What Do You Do after Good-bye?**

What do you do after someone says good-bye? Well, after good-bye we know we need to move on. But it is more complex than that. We also need to remember. So we often make reminders.

You see it on the roadsides. You see the cross painted white. That is where someone special to others left this world. The not-yet-faded flowers on the marker says that someone still comes here and remembers.

It isn’t always so melancholy. Some people do such great things that an entire nation wants to remember. Take a look at the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Memorial, Mt. Rushmore.

Just a couple weeks ago a monument which had been in the making for years, was dedicated in Elizabethtown. Unlike many other monuments, this monument is not about one person, nor even really about their greatness, but simply about the sacrifice tens of thousands of people made for their country and its people.

People like monuments. Monuments are statements about what we hold dear, what we value in people, in life. Unlike words, monuments stand. Even when we pass away, when our generation passes away, sometimes even when a civilization passes away, its monuments endure.

The Christian faith has its monuments and memorials, of sorts. If you go to the land of Israel, you can find churches built in commemoration of almost every event in Jesus’ life. You can go to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the Church of the Nativity. You can visit churches commemorating where Jesus fed the 5,000, was crucified, and preached the Sermon on the Mount. He has gone into heaven, but what better way to remember him than with monuments and memorials, right?

But here is the thing about the different monuments to the moments in Jesus’ life: We don’t really know that any of these monuments are built where the events actually occurred! There is hardly a single thing from Jesus’ life that we can definitively say, “This is definitely where it happened.” Archeologists have made guesses, but they disagree. The ancient church had traditions, but those traditions are just after-the-fact guesses.

Which makes you wonder: Why didn’t they keep track, those early believers? Didn’t they understand? Didn’t they get it? I mean, Jesus is the true King of Kings, who also gave up more for us than anyone else. Jesus was an army of One who saved billions at the cost of his own blood and tortured sufferings! Shouldn’t the first Christians have remembered where Jesus did these great things? Why didn’t they ask Mary exactly where the stable in Bethlehem was located? Why didn’t they keep track of the exact site of Jesus’ cross? Why did it take them centuries to get around to building these things. People like monuments!

Our reading today tells us at least part of why the early Christians didn’t build memorials and monuments to Jesus. And the same truth is profoundly important to us Christians in this day.

**Things Changed When Jesus Said Good-Bye**

In his three years with his disciples, Jesus had taught his disciples. But his disciples had missed some very important points. So in his last forty days between his resurrection from the dead and his ascension to heaven, Jesus does a crash course on those crucial points.

Jesus completely re-focused his ministry after his resurrection. After his resurrection, Jesus never healed anyone. He drove out no demons. In those forty days it seems that Jesus appeared to noone except his believers. In the forty days between Easter and Ascension, Jesus focused, apparently exclusively, on prepping his disciples for the moment they would be left on their own. When he said good-bye, he wanted them to know what to do.

So in our reading ***“[Jesus] opened their mids so they could understand the Scriptures.”*** ***“He opened their minds.”*** Wouldn’t you have loved to have been there? Not just a middle aged pastor who had a B+ average, but Jesus himself opening the Scriptures, answering all your questions? As he opened their minds, ***“He told them, ‘This 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.’”***

The reason Jesus didn’t go back to doing what he had been doing was that everything that Jesus had come to do, he had done. There would be no resurrected “Kingdom of David,” no golden age for the Jewish people with Jesus on a throne in Jerusalem. It wasn’t about healing the sick or poverty elimination, medical advances or speaking truth to power. It was about Jesus saving humanity from our self-inflicted curse of sin. That was why he came, even if the disciples didn’t understand it at the time. With his resurrection he had completed it.

But there was more: not for him, but for others. Did you hear it? ***“He told them, ‘This 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.’”*** This is why Jesus didn’t want them building monuments.

We build monuments, at least partly, “so that we never forget.” And so we build monuments: crosses at the site of road-side accidents, marble columned temples to great people. And I get that. We *do not* want to forget.

But with Jesus we do not need monuments. Monuments require people to go to them. And Jesus said that something much more dynamic would happen once he left: ***“repentance and forgiveness of sins be preached to all nations.”*** The disciples job was not to be monument builders expecting the world to come to them, but to be shepherds looking for lost sheep.

The Christian faith isn’t about energetically building or patiently preserving monuments of Jesus’ big moments in life. It is about people. It is about taking the Gospel of Jesus to more and more people in this world. It is about strengthening and embedding this faith in the people who already know it.

I can’t say that this is the reason that Jesus left us, but it is a benefit of him leaving us: if Jesus were still walking on this earth, would people not flock to him? Especially Christians? We would make it our goal in life to save up our money to go see him at least once in a lifetime. We would spend great sums of money and then tell our kids about the time we shook his hand. And we would forget that God’s plan of salvation is not about building monuments, or talking about the time we got to see Jesus. We would forget that the Scriptures, Old and New, tell us that ***“repentance and forgiveness of sins [needs to] be preached to all nations.”*** When Jesus said good-bye, the disciples’ eyes were suddenly turned away from within their group to looking outwardly at the world around them.

The work of being saved has been done. Now our work is to spread the news. A church building is not a memorial to Jesus. It is where Christ’s people gather. The reason we gather here is so that we may individually be strengthened in our faith, in our certainty of forgiveness and life, and then carry that into our individual lives. Here we gather also to unite our efforts to reach out. We reach out into our community not only individually, but as a group. So we have our Vacation Bible School, our booth at Hooray for Heroes. This house of God is also where we band together with hundreds of other congregations to support ministries which no one church could do: sending missionaries to other lands; starting new churches within our own; having a worker training system so that we have well-trained pastors and teachers. We don’t build monuments. Our mission is that ***“repentance and forgiveness of sins be preached to all nations.”***

When we get lazy about this, we sin. When we find ourselves content to sit with family and pray, “God bless us four and no more,” we dishonor Christ’s commission. When we place a protective shield around our time, our income, our abilities labelled “Mine!” and have no desire to use these in God’s service, we sin. When we consistently walk through life without acting on a concern for the souls of others, oh, how we sin against Christ and his last words to the disciples. How we need our Savior day by day!

And it is just this Savior that we portray to the world. He reminds you that, ***“This is what is written… repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached to all nations… You are witnesses.”*** Not every single person needs to be involved in knocking on doors speaking the Gospel. But that is not what we ask when we ask if you can cook or decorate or teach or assist with games or crafts in Vacation Bible School. God invites you to use your gifts for him. You, in your own way, are to be part of it. Remember that it is because someone else was a witness of Christ that you are here today. Without them, you would not be one of the saved.

There was a time in this nation when, if you wanted an excuse, you could squint hard enough and imagine that everyone had had a chance to hear about Jesus. Not that that absolves us from speaking the Gospel, but some people imagine it that way. But the reality which we all know is that we live in a nation where unbelief is growing, where more and more people are *not* calling on Christ as their Savior. Instead they are headed toward eternal condemnation.

Supposedly, 75% of Americans self-identify as Christian. Really? A man recently told of a co-worker who claimed to be a Christian. This self-identified “Christian,” one of the 75%, thought that Jesus is just a fictional character, just make-believe. Like the Gospels are some sort of Grimm’s fairy tales with Jesus as the main character. So much for the supposed 75% who claim to be Christian. How can we imagine that there is nothing for us to do? Our world, our nation, our community needs us to remember Jesus’ words: ***“You are witnesses of these things!”***

Jesus didn’t want monument builders, he wanted witnesses. As Jesus had to come to save us, so also repentance and the forgiveness of sins has to be preached to the world through us that others might be saved. There is no other way.

So what did they do when Jesus ascended into heaven? They didn’t go back to the Mount of Olives the next day, find the exact spot where Jesus’ holy foot last touched earth, and commission a monument.

***“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.”*** There they stayed continually at the temple, praising God… for ten days. Not mourning his departure, not wishing that he was still with them. But rejoicing that now they understood what he had done for them. There they waited patiently for the gift that Jesus had promised. And when Jesus’ gift came ten days later on Pentecost, then came the time to preach repentance and forgiveness to the ends of the world.

When Jesus ascended to heaven and said good-bye, it was a sign that now we have the privilege of being Jesus’ witnesses to the ends of the world. Not building monuments, but proclaiming Christ. Amen.