

“Endings and Beginnings”

Luke 24:44-53; Acts 1:1-11

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“Nothing will get you out of an inning quicker than a triple play,” one of the Braves’ announcers said as I turned the radio on to catch the latest score last Friday evening. I did not hear which manager they attributed the quote to, but I laughed out loud the more I thought about it. It sounds like something Yogi Berra would have said, doesn’t it?

“Nothing will get you out of this world quicker than an ascension,” I thought as my mind wandered off to this sermon. Perhaps this was why the disciples stood gazing up toward heaven when Jesus drifted out of sight. In a twinkling of an eye, he was gone.

Are you aware that Luke is the only Gospel writer that chronicles the departure of Jesus? While John does not record an ascension, Jesus says to Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to my Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father’ ” John 20:17.

What was Luke’s purpose for writing about the ascension of Jesus? Why did he include two accounts of the ascension, one on Easter Sunday and the other forty days later? How does his ascension speak to us, especially on Memorial Day weekend as we remember those that have departed and are no longer with us? Let me share some thoughts for you to consider as you ponder these questions.

It appears Luke used the ascension of Jesus to close the period of Jesus’ ministry and open the period of the church’s mission. According to Dr. Alan Culpepper, this makes both accounts appropriate.

Think about it. Something dramatic had to happen to let the disciples know that the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus were over. No longer would he be with them as he had been. He was gone and that was final. One stage was past and another had begun.

It was time to receive the Holy Spirit and put into practice all he taught and modeled. His earthly ministry was over, but theirs was not. In some ways, it was just beginning and there was much to do. This was why Jesus commissioned the disciples and gave them a final blessing.

Endings and beginnings, isn’t this what Memorial Day is about, too? This is a weekend for looking back and ahead. We’ll remember those that have departed this life and renew our commitment to continue their good work. I definitely see a connection between the ascension of Jesus and Memorial Day. Let me tell you how.

The ascension of Jesus reminds us that there will be times in all our lives when someone we depend upon will leave us. Even Jesus could not stay with his disciples forever. This relationship, like all relationships, was subject to change.

What relationships are changing in your life now? Are you preparing to send your child to college? Has a family member taken a job away from home? Is a son or daughter getting married this summer and heading in a new direction? Have you recently been to a cemetery and buried someone you dearly loved?

Is this a tender weekend for you because it reminds you of all the changes that have or will soon occur in your life? Will you place flowers on someone’s grave tomorrow?

We must not let the loss of someone, even someone we were dependent upon, paralyze us. In both accounts of the ascension of Jesus, Luke looked forward as well as backward. He reminded his readers of Jesus’ parting words to the disciples.

“Thus it is written, 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” Luke 24:47-48.

“You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth” Acts 1:8b.

How were they to do this, in light of the fact that Jesus would not be with them as he had been for three years? They were to be led and empowered by the Spirit, promised to them by the Father. Even though Jesus would not be with them in the flesh, they would not be alone. They would be “clothed” with the Spirit from above.

This is the key to moving on after any loss. We, too, must rely upon the Holy Spirit to comfort, sustain, lead, guide and empower us. Without His help, we run the risk of becoming hostages to anger, grief and bitterness. With His help, our very trials can become testimonies of God’s grace and power.

I see another connection between this passage and Memorial Day. **I believe all of us have a responsibility to prepare those who depend upon us for the time when we will no longer be with them.** Jesus certainly did this. Listen to the words of Luke 24:44-49.

“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. Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures and he said to them, ‘Thus it is written, 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. You are witnesses of these things. 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.’ ”

Did you know that Luke emphasized the fulfillment of scripture in the resurrection appearances more than any New Testament writer? He quoted from the Torah, the prophets and the Writings. Why did he do this? He wanted to show his readers what Jesus did for his disciples. He used words familiar to them to “open the minds of the disciples” and prepare them for his arrest, crucifixion and resurrection.

Sometimes we, too, have to open peoples’ minds to possibilities that they would rather ignore. Like Jesus, we have to expand their understanding.

Randy Pausch did this for his family and friends. You recall that he was the forty-seven year old computer science professor at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. In 2005, he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and he took the final two years of his life to prepare those dependent upon him for his death.

One of the things he did was to co-author a book titled, The Last Lecture. It was based upon the last lecture he gave to his students on September 18, 2007. In this lecture, Pausch spoke about the importance of overcoming obstacles, living life to the fullest and helping others achieve their dreams.

Perhaps you watched the lecture on You Tube, and if you did, you recall that he did not write this lecture for his students, but his three children and wife. The students merely listened to what he had to say to them, which applied to their lives, too.

This lecture and the book that followed were the way he prepared his family for life without him. I am certain that it helped him process his own grief, too.

In all likelihood, we’ll not do something on the grand scale that Randy Pausch did, but we need to follow his example. We, too, need to prepare those who are dependent upon us for the time when we’ll no longer be with them.

Who can help you do this? I believe the same Spirit that helped Jesus prepare his disciples will help you, too. Will you call upon Him?

Will you also call upon God to help you with your grief today? You may have visited a cemetery this weekend and are feeling the pain of separation. Will you ask Him to walk with you through the valley of the shadow of death and lead you in new directions? I am confident He will accompany you every step of the way, just as he did his disciples.

