

Luke 24:32-49

³⁵ Then the two recounted what had taken place on the way and how he was made known to them in the breaking of the bread. ³⁶ While they were still speaking about this, he stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace be with you." ³⁷ But they were startled and terrified and thought that they were seeing a ghost. ³⁸ Then he said to them, "Why are you troubled? And why do questions arise in your hearts?" ³⁹ Look at my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me and see, because a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you can see I have." ⁴⁰ And as he said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. ⁴¹ While they were still incredulous for joy and were amazed, he asked them, "Have you anything here to eat?" ⁴² They gave him a piece of baked fish; ⁴³ he took it and ate it in front of them. ⁴⁴ 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 and in the prophets and 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 would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day ⁴⁷ and that repentance, for the forgiveness of sins, would be preached in his name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ And (behold) I am sending the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high."

Context

In the Lucan recounting of the events of the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus, our story occurs on the evening of Easter Sunday. The women have found the tomb empty, there have been encounters with the Resurrected Jesus, and the news is spreading among the small group of faithful. But not all have heard – not the two disciples on the "Road to Emmaus" (24:17)

The first verse of our gospel more traditionally belongs to the story of the disciple encountering Jesus on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:13-35). Let us pick up the ending of that story:

³⁰ And it happened that, while he was with them at table, he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them. ³¹ With that their eyes were opened and they recognized him, but he vanished from their sight. ³² Then they said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning (within us) while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?" ³³ So they set out at once and returned to Jerusalem where they found gathered together the eleven and those with them ³⁴ who were saying, "The Lord has truly been raised and has appeared to Simon!" ³⁵ Then the two recounted what had taken place on the way and how he was made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Now they have made the long trek back to Jerusalem, found the community gathered in the upper room, and shared their encounter. *While they were still speaking about this, [Jesus] stood in their midst.*"

If the reality of Jesus' spiritual presence in the church was emphasized in the preceding narrative, the physical reality of his resurrection body is emphasized here. From the earliest times in the church, there was a danger of docetism, the heretical belief that Jesus was God behind a thin veneer of humanity: thus his suffering was only playacting, and his resurrection was simply a return to a completely spiritual existence with no bodily effect. The Letters of John combated this error (1 John 4:2-3; 2 John 7). The present narrative stresses that Jesus' resurrection body is real and not simply a resuscitated corpse. The disciples touch him; the marks of the passion are visible in his hands and feet; he eats with the disciples – even as he as simply appeared among them. Luke is making the point that this Resurrection is beyond any category of Greek or Hellenistic thought. There is something new afoot.

Brian Stoffregen provides good reason to review the “Road to Emmaus” account as he points out the parallels between the back-to-back Lucan accounts. Each in its own way is a story of the growth in faith as the disciples experience:

EMMAUS	JERUSALEM/Bethany
Jesus appears on the road disciples fail to recognize him Jesus scolds them for not believing Jesus instructs them from scripture Food is shared disciples' eyes are opened Jesus disappears	Jesus appears in their midst disciples assume it is a ghost Jesus scolds them for doubting Food is shared Jesus instructs them disciples' minds are opened Jesus ascends into heaven
MOVEMENT “blindness” to sight	MOVEMENT doubting to worship

Commentary

Jesus had predicted his passion and death – and that those predictions have come to pass is all too apparent to the small community of disciples sequestered away in the upper room, unsure of all that has passed, and even more unsure of what awaits them. But Jesus had also predicted his resurrection. In this Lucan narrative Jesus manifests himself not only to selected individuals (vv. 31, 34) but to the whole company of his followers. Their reaction is less than stellar: *But they were startled and terrified and thought that they were seeing a ghost.* Only in the later Lucan account of the Ascension (vv.50–53) do fear, amazement, and doubt (vv.37, 41) give way to worship, great joy, and obedience.

Lest we import our own post-Resurrection understanding on this story, we are wise to let the account tell us what is unfolding. The disciples have heard of several encounters with the Resurrected Jesus. The disciples from the Emmaus road have returned to proclaim: *“The Lord is risen, indeed!”* (v.34). And when Jesus appears in their midst and speaks words of peace (v.36), their response is *“But they were startled and terrified and thought that they were seeing a ghost”* (v.37) In that moment their posture of faith is revealed as an “half-finished” faith - they do not accept the whole of Jesus’ teaching concerning how the divine purpose would be fulfilled in him. Thus, in this account, Jesus undertakes to unveil the truth of his resurrection in several ways—the first two oriented toward underscoring the materiality of his continued existence (vv.38–43), and the latter concerned with its scriptural significance (vv. 44–49).

Speaking about these things. It is a simple part of one verse: *“While they were still speaking about this..”* (v.36). Our Lectionary does well to include the previous verse – even though it is more properly part of the Emmaus road story: *“Then the two recounted what had taken place on the way and how he was made known to them in the breaking of the bread”* (v.35). As Catholics were are often prone to focus only on the “*breaking of the bread*” and its Eucharistic implications. We should also consider *“what had taken place on the way.”* As Joel Green [853] remarks, “*this*” refers to “evidences of the risen Lord, but more profoundly with the coherence between the pattern provided by Moses and all the prophets, the prophetic witness of the Scriptures to the Messiah who suffers and enters into his glory, the ministry of Jesus as this has been focused on table fellowship, and the experience of the resurrected Jesus.”

Fearing where angels tread. The report that Jesus “stood” among them echoes the language of OT angelophanies (Gen 18:2; 1 Chr 21:15–16; Dan 8:15; 12:5; Tob 5:4; cf. Num 22:22–24; Luke 1:11; Acts 10:30). Apparently they recognize the one before them as Jesus, but are not ready to accept that he could have any form other than an intangible one. It should not be surprising that the disciples are “startled and terrified.” They think they are seeing a *ghost* (v.37, 29). These are the only places where *pneuma* (spirit) is translated “ghost”.

Their terror (*emphobos*) is consistent with seeing an angel. That is the reaction of the women at the tomb at seeing the “two men in dazzling clothes” appearing before them (Luke 24:5) and the reaction of Cornelius at seeing a vision of an angel of God coming to him (*Acts 10:4*). When an angel appeared to Zechariah, he is terrified (*tarasso*) (1:12), the same word Jesus uses of the disciples, “Why are you troubled?” (24:38). In contrast to the popular notion of a comforting guardian angel, the presence of these divine beings produced great terror and fear in those who saw them. Except for coming to Jesus in the garden (22:43), every other time angels (*aggelos*) appear, they say, “Don’t be afraid” – to Zechariah (1:13); to Mary (1:30); and to the Shepherds (2:10).

Offering Proof. Jesus does not rebuke them for their lack of faith but offers two proofs of his own materiality as evidence of his resurrected existence. Negating two among the several possible categories for imagining the afterlife—one barbaric, the other more sophisticated—Luke first shows that Jesus’ disciples do not mistake him for a cadaver brought back to life (v.37), then confirms that Jesus is not an “immortal soul” free from bodily existence. It is why Jesus assures them with the phrase *egō emini autos* – “it is I myself” – or in modern English, “It’s really me!”

In the face of such proof, the disciples “were still incredulous [apistēō – lit. not trusting, not believing] for joy [charas] and were amazed [thamazontōn].” A little closer to the literal Greek is “While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering” (NRSV) – but perhaps more colloquially, “for it seemed too good to be true” (NEB). The other instance of “not believing” (*apisteo*) in Luke occurs when the women tell the disciples about their experiences at the empty tomb. “These words seemed like nonsense to them, and they did not believe (apisteo) them” (24:11). In the next verse, after Peter has been to the empty tomb, he goes home, “amazed (thaumazo) at what had happened.” Both the empty tomb and, so far, this appearance of Jesus produced only incredulity and amazement – two emotions that seem to get in the way of believing.

Jesus next offering of proof is presented with much fewer words and with no response from the disciples. Jesus eats in their presence. However, if we look back to the previous appearance story in Emmaus, we know that Jesus eating with the disciples opened up their eyes to see the truth about Jesus.

Bible Study. The second part of the appearance to the eleven and the others looks both backward and forward. Neither the text of the Emmaus Road story or this account provides any hints at the specific OT texts Jesus points to: “in the law of Moses and in the prophets and psalms...” (v.46). As Jesus “opened their minds” this interlude serves both to bring closure to the disciples’ period of “fear” by recapping major themes of the Gospel and setting the stage for the coming of the Spirit and the work of the disciples as witnesses in the book of Acts. Verses 44–46 return to the theme of the necessity of Jesus’ death and the fulfillment of Scripture, while in vv. 47–49 Jesus commissions the disciples, promises their empowerment from on high, and outlines the mission that lies ahead. There are three parts of his instructions about what has been written.

- He is to suffer -- the messiah.
- He is to be raised from the dead on the third day.
- They are to be his witnesses, going in his name to proclaim repentance leading to the forgiveness of sins to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

Green [857] writes:

“Which Scriptures portend messianic suffering and resurrection? One would be hard-pressed to locate specific texts that make these prognostications explicit. Even to attempt to do so would be wrongheaded, however. The point of Jesus’ words is not that such-and-such a verse has now come true, but that the truth to which all of the Scriptures point has now been realized! Even so, Luke does provide direct hints for the scriptural basis of the reversal Jesus has experienced in his life, death, and resurrection, by drawing above all on the psalms and Isaiah in his presentation of Jesus’ passion. Similarly, the proclamation of repentance for forgiveness of sins to all nations is scripturally based, with the Lukan narrative suggesting in this respect the pivotal importance of Isa 49:6. Simeon borrows from this text in Luke 2:32, Paul cites it in Acts 13:47, and it is echoed again in Acts 1:8 (cf. Acts 26:23; 28:28). This scriptural background manifestly portends the mission to all peoples.”

Pointing to the life in the Early Church.

Since these disciples are to continue Jesus’ ministry, perhaps it is not surprising that they are to proclaim the salvific message “*in his name.*” In fact, what is done in the “*name*” of Jesus surfaces as an important motif in Acts. Luke will portray a community very much oriented around Jesus (1:1, 21–22)—with salvation offered to “*everyone who calls on the name of the Lord*” (= Jesus; cf. 2:21, 36), and people directed to be baptized “*in the name of Jesus Christ*” (2:38), appropriating the blessings available through and signaling their allegiance to him. Subsequently in Acts Christians heal (3:6, 16; 4:10, 30; 19:13), preach (4:12; 5:28, 40), and are baptized (8:16; 10:48; 19:5) in the name of Jesus; suffer for his name (5:41; 9:16; 21:13); and are those “*who call upon the name*” of Jesus (9:14, 21; 22:16). The mission role of the disciples is summarized in the words, “*You are witnesses of these things.*”

Jesus’ last statement to the disciples is an assurance that he will send “*the promise of my Father*” upon them and that they will be “*clothed with power from on high*” (v. 49). The assurance is notable for its ambiguity; it does not explicitly refer to the Holy Spirit. This part of the commission to the disciples will be repeated almost verbatim in Acts 1:4, but there it is followed by a clarifying comment: “*you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit*” (Acts 1:5).

The language of sending recurs frequently in Luke, almost in a Johannine sense. Jesus himself was sent (4:18, 43; 9:48; 10:16), and he sent the disciples (9:2, 52; 10:1, 3; 22:35). Now he promises to send what the Father promised (cf. John 14:16, 26; 15:26). There is no previous reference to “*the promise of the Father*” in Luke, but various references to the Spirit, especially at the beginning of the Gospel (cf. 1:15, 35, 41, 67; 2:25–26; 3:16, 22; 4:1; 10:21). The closest antecedent to Jesus’ assurance in v. 49 is the earlier assurance, “*How much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him.*” (11:13).

The metaphor of being clothed was used in early baptismal contexts (Gal 3:27; cf. 1 Cor 15:53–54; Eph 4:24; 6:11, 14; Col 3:10–12). “*Power*” (*dynamis*) has attended Jesus’ work throughout the Gospel (1:35; 4:14, 36; 5:17; 6:19; 8:46; 19:37). The Son of Man will be seated “*at the right hand of the power of God*” (22:69) and come again with power and glory (21:27), but now the risen Lord promises to confer that power on the disciples (cf. 9:1). The conferring of the Spirit from on high will also fulfill the Scriptures (see Isa 32:15; Joel 2:28). There will be plenty of work for the disciples to do, but for now their instructions are to stay in Jerusalem and wait for the fulfillment of the Lord’s promises.

A Final Reflection

Only the risen Christ Himself was able to conquer the fear, bewilderment and doubt of his disciples and to prepare them to enter the world as witnesses of the good news. Even today it is only the risen

Savior Himself who can banish all fear from our hearts, and give us the inward rest and peace to enable us to be living witnesses of Jesus. And all the spiritual equipment that we need, He gives us through the Spirit, already given to his church on that first Pentecost and to every believer in the sacraments and in prayer. We possess the divine strength for the task to which we have been called.

Sources

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