

## Follow the Game Plan

Luke 24:44-53

Crossroads Christian Church

Acts 1:1-11

May 8, 2016 Ascension C

Perhaps, since Lent began way back on February 10, you've noticed a recurring theme—time after time, Jesus would tell the disciples something they didn't want to hear. They did their best to try and forget these words. They tried their best to misunderstand these words. They tried their best to misinterpret these words. Remember back when Peter made the great confession, "You are the Christ"? Jesus acknowledged Peter's confession, and then explained, "The Human One"—that was a term that Jesus used in formal declarations about himself, and always in the third person—"The human one must suffer many things and be rejected—by the elders, chief priests, and the legal experts—and be killed and be raised on the third day." (Luke 9:22) Peter protested, as you might recall, and said that such a thing could never happen. It was ridiculous to even think it. And Jesus said, "Get behind me, Satan," because Peter's human agenda for Jesus was at cross purposes to what God wanted.

That was what they had to expect. That was God's game plan. They had to learn to trust that God knew what God was doing. But it didn't come easy. The disciples had been on a spiritual high for so long, for they had seen Jesus preach, teach, and heal. They had seen Jesus feed the multitudes and walk on water. They would see Jesus raise people who had died. They knew in their hearts that God was going to do something wonderful through Jesus. But going to Jerusalem? Giving himself up to his enemies without a fight? Letting himself be executed like a common criminal? No, that couldn't be. And what could it mean, "be raised on the third day?" Did that even make sense? But they stayed with Jesus, and as the conflict grew, as traps were laid, as resistance stiffened, that dark prophecy grew more and more real.

Then, finally, it happened, just as Jesus said it would. He prayed in the Garden that he wouldn't have to drink from the cup of sacrifice, but gave himself over to God's will. Soon, armed guards hauled him off to a kangaroo court. He was found guilty and executed as an enemy of the state. Then, three days later, came the astounding news. Jesus wasn't in the tomb. He had risen. He was alive. He showed himself to the disciples back in the Upper Room, on the Emmaus Road, on the shore of Lake Galilee, and many other places.

On one of these appearances, the one we heard in today's Gospel reading, Jesus said, "Peace be with you," and, of course, scared the willies out of them. Then, after assuring them that he was a physical being and not a ghost, he gave them the rest of the game plan. He reminded them of how his teachings showed them that God had fulfilled through him the teachings

of the Psalms and the prophets, and reviewed with them how this was so. This all led up to reminding them of the original game plan, that Jesus “will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day.” Now was the time to flesh out the rest of the game plan. His resurrection would bring about repentance—a change of heart and life, that would bring people forgiveness of sins. This would be true not only for Jerusalem and Israel, but for the whole world. Who was going to spread the word? They were, with the help of the Holy Spirit. “You are witnesses of these things,” he told them. The word for a witness in Greek is the root word of our term martyr. “You are witnesses of these things,” the ones who would take the message into the world, laying down their lives, if necessary. “You are my witnesses for these things”—apostles, the ambassadors of Jesus. Then he said, “Look, I’m sending to you what my Father promised,” here he was referring to the gift of the Holy Spirit. First, though, they had to wait. “You are to stay in the city until you have been furnished with heavenly power.” (24:49) In other words, you have your marching orders, but first you have your waiting orders. And you’ll have to wait until next Sunday, Pentecost, to hear how that would happen. Then came the ascension. First he led them to Bethany, that village northeast of Jerusalem where Mary, Martha, and Lazarus lived; the village where they saw Jesus’ greatest miracle occur. He gave them a blessing; and suddenly, swooped up out of sight.

Luke is the only Gospel writer to tell us of the Ascension, and he retells the story in Acts 1. The early Jewish followers of Jesus, including the disciples, remembered the story of Elijah, the great prophet being carried off to heaven on a chariot of fire. This was the same Elijah who was supposed to return at the end of the age, and who appeared with Jesus at the Transfiguration. This would have confirmed to the disciples that Jesus was a true prophet as well as the Messiah. It would have confirmed and completed the Resurrection.

There’s a Christian singing group called New Song, and here’s what they sang about Jesus...

"He said goodbye to the angels of heaven and he came to earth as a common man. There were those who believed and followed him, and there were those who wanted him dead. They thought the grave would silence him forever. But they found out instead...You can't keep a good man down. "They nailed him to the cross by hands and feet, and they put him in the ground. Three days later everybody found out that you can't, no you can't...keep a good man down. No you can't, no you can't, no you can't keep a good man down."<sup>1</sup> (unquote)

They had tried to nail Jesus down—first, in trying to trap him into self-incriminating questions, finally by nailing him to a cross. But you can’t keep

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted by James B. Lemler, “You Can’t Keep a Good Man Down,” Day1.org.

a good man down. They thought they had solved the Jesus problem, but you can't keep a good man down. Now the risen Christ would leave the disciples. This would be his last resurrection appearance. The Christ who had triumphantly entered Jerusalem some days before, now triumphantly entered heaven. God won. Christ won. You can't keep a good man down.

Was the game plan successful? Yes it was. Was the game plan complete? Hardly. When Jesus completed his mission on earth, the apostles' work was just beginning. From Acts 1, we read how just before the Ascension, his disciples asked if now Jesus was going to restore Israel, bring her freedom from foreign rule. Jesus replied, "It isn't for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has set by his own authority. Rather, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." (Acts 1:7-8) (unquote)

The next step in the game plan wasn't up to Jesus anymore. It was up to them—up to the apostles, and ultimately up to all who would follow the way of Jesus Christ. They would receive power from the Holy Spirit which would enable them to carry the faith, the good news of God's salvation, out in concentric circles. It would start in Jerusalem, and expand outward to Judea and Samaria, then into the whole world. It was up to them, and now it's up to us. His ascension was like an exclamation point to his challenge. Then, afterwards, remember the angels asking the disciples why they were just standing around staring into the sky? It was time—first, to wait for the Spirit—story continued to next week—then to share the wonderful story.

You may have wondered about the picture on the screen today, a depiction of the Ascension by a Korean artist, Ki-Chang Kim. A Christian missionary during the Korean War suggested he paint biblical scenes with a Korean backdrop, and he painted about 30 within a year. "I was praying for the quick end of the Korean War and a unified peace, and soothed my painful mind with a paintbrush," he later said.<sup>2</sup>

His story dramatizes how successful the apostles were at starting to spread the good news of Jesus Christ. It reminds us that the game plan is still in effect. The Gospel is still ours, not to hold tightly onto, but to share. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> churchpop.com/.../if-jesus-had-been-korean