

Oh, God! Now What? **Luke 24:44-53**

Saint Marks UMC, Charleston, WV Ascension Sunday (May 8) 2016

NARRATOR: Jesus appeared to the disciples after his resurrection and said to them:

JESUS: 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 the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.

NARRATOR: Then Jesus opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them:

JESUS: Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. 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.

NARRATOR: Then Jesus led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God.

At the beginning of this sermon series, back on April 3, I introduced it with a story of Jesus ascending unto heaven and being greeted by the angel, Gabriel, who welcomed Him home, and asked Jesus, **“Who’s going to run the operation on earth now that you are back home, Jesus?”** And Jesus said: **“My disciples.”** Gabriel reminded Jesus of how dense they were while He was with them, and how they deserted Him when He was being tried and crucified, and how they are generally an unreliable group. Then Gabriel said to Jesus, **“So, what’s Plan B, Jesus?”** And Jesus said, quite solemnly, **“There is no Plan B. It’s all up to them.”** And Gabriel walks away shaking his head.

Back on April 3, I said that the purpose of these sermons and worship were about Jesus (during the time between Resurrection and Ascension) preparing the disciples back then to be ready to take over the Church, and to prove Gabriel wrong. These sermons, and worship, were also to renew that ever ongoing task of preparing US today for carrying on the work of the Church, as Ambassadors of the Kingdom of God, as the earthly manifestations of the Body of Christ in the world.

Let me share a little story that was extrapolated, as a midrash, from today’s Gospel lesson:

Once upon a time, long ago, a great spiritual master gathered all his disciples and followers around him. Lovingly, he spoke to them, “My

friends, it is time for me to return to my Father. Where I now go, you cannot follow. But do not be sad, for I will come back and take you with me to live forever in paradise.

At this announcement the small band of faithful disciples wept and pleaded with him not to leave. But, in spite of their tears and pleas, the Master took them out to a high mountain where he blessed them and tried to comfort them with words of love and encouragement. Then with his arms raised to the sky and his eyes heavenward, he prayed, “Father, I am ready.” Slowly the master began to rise from the earth.

The small band of faithful followers buried their faces in their hands and wept. One of them, however, the close friend and intimate disciple of the Master, cried out, “O Master, don’t leave me – I love you.!” Suddenly the disciple jumped upward and grasped the Master’s ankle!

The Master stalled in midair, listing to one side as his disciple dangled below. As they both hung motionless above the earth, the Master exclaimed, “Let go, my friend, let go. You know that I must ascend to my Father, but you are not ready. Now ... let GO!”

But the stubborn adherent did *not* let go as he had been commanded. In fact, he clung to the ankle even more persistently. In fact, he clung to the ankle even more persistently and continued to plead, “O take me with you, dear friend, I cannot live without you.”

The Master looked heavenward and prayed, “Father, what am I to do?”

At that moment a great cloud overshadowed the mountain top, and a voice spoke like a rumble of thunder. “Ascend, my beloved, ascend!” So, with no little effort, the Master began again to ascend with his beloved disciples dangling from his left leg.

Now I need not tell you that the mood on the mountain underwent a radical change while all of this was happening. The mood shifted from deep sorrow to open anger. The close and special relationship between the disciple and the Master had always been a sore point in the small band of disciples ... and now this!

The rest of the disciples began shouting to the disciple who dangled from the Master's leg, "Let go, let go. You're holding the Master back! Let go, you fool!" The crowd ... all looked on in amazement as the disciples jumped up and down and shook their fists in anger.

[Before long, first one person and then another, and finally all of the people gathered there, and then the bears and foxes, birds and bugs, flowers and trees, *ALL got into the act* until here was the *Master moving upward, with a vast pyramid of people, animals, and vegetation into the sky over the mountaintop*. And it suddenly occurred to the Master: Perhaps my job is not to be savior of the world, but just one great big skyhook!]

Like the disciples in that story, sometimes we, too, are not quite ready for the classroom experience to be over. We don't quite feel ready to take on the responsibility of being the Body of Christ in the world today. Instead of doing what Jesus was preparing us to do, we just want to hold onto Him and do nothing but hold on.

1. That fanciful midrash story (from a delightful little book called *S[en]t George and the Dragon and the Quest for the Holy Grail*) shows how disciples then and now claim to be not ready for Jesus to leave and for us to do our Heavenly work.
2. It also shows how we have a constant desire to ***drag Jesus back down to our level.***

3. And, finally, that little story of the upward bound pyramid also demonstrates the importance of us to be willing to do great things, ***by keeping our feet on the ground***. Some people say that the Church is so heavenly minded that it is no earthly good.

There are **great things** Jesus has in store for us to do – and we HAVE done great things in 2,000 years. Jesus said that we would be able to do even greater things than He did. We need to be ready to **F – L – Y, up up and away!**

Yes, Jesus said to **wait for the power of the Holy Spirit**. And NEXT SUNDAY we will celebrate **Pentecost**. ***But there have been a lot of Pentecost celebrations every year for some 2,000 years, and some people are still sitting, sitting, sitting. Sometimes it seems like the church does a “Ready – Aim – Aim – Aim – Aim”*** And it never gets around to actually firing.

But the **road to greatness is paved with lots of “little good stones.”**

So, right now, the ushers will distribute a small card, upon which you are invited to write. And members of the worship committee and the Upper Room group are going to distribute a balloon to you. On that small card. I invite you to write down some good thing that you could do on behalf of Jesus. Then you will hook that card to the balloon you receive. And then, in just a few moments at my direction, we are all going to launch them here shortly (not outside where they can cause all manner of harm) but inside,

- as a sign and symbol of how THIS Church is not going to hold back;
- of how the disciples of this Church are going to get real, get active, get fulfilled, get Kingdom-bound, and be a part of the greatest enterprise the world has ever known.

We can't simply sit around on our hands waiting to do something great, and never get around to doing anything. **There is not a single person in this congregation** who is ***not able to do good things*** on behalf of the Kingdom of

Heaven. Let me give you some examples:

1. Make a regular and dedicated daily time set aside to Pray for your pastors, for the leaders of the church, and for those who are sick and needy
2. And work on making our prayer quilts and shawls
3. Of course, there's always volunteering to help in the office
4. And how about helping with Children's Church or teaching a Sunday School class
5. We have over 25 people who go to Edgewood Summit to share a worship time with folks there unable to get out to their own churches. You might be called to participate in that ministry.
6. Phyllis and Jim White, and Jimmy Fisher work every week to make sure that we have our food and fellowship time in the New Room after worship. Could you help there?
7. Has God given you the gifts that enable you to help out in maintenance work around the church? We've got a small group who is now working on painting rooms inside the church building, so we don't have to pay contractors to come in and do what we can do.
8. Could you be an usher or a greeter or a member of the Altar Guild?
9. Could you sing in the choir or play handbells or steel drums?
10. Could you do telephoning from your home – to contact members who appear to be MIA, or to check on folks living alone.
11. Could you benefit by joining the more than 25 people who do work with our Friday night ministries with homeless folks in the neighborhood
12. Maybe you could come twice a month to the 7:30 a.m. Upper Room prayer and study group, which is a think tank for many of the new ideas

and ministries of Saint Marks. Or maybe you could participate twice a month on Saturday at 9:00 a.m. in the work of the Mission Committee.

13. Or maybe you have an idea that no one else has spoken – something God has gifted you to do, but you’ve been holding back. Or, perhaps, a new idea is being given to you right now.

Most of those questions that began with **“Could”** really should have begun with **“WILL”**.

Here’s the point: You are NOT ALLOWED to have an empty card. [Let me get real here.](#)

After all that God has given, and continues to give, you -- sitting back and doing nothing is not a valid option. God has given you so very, very much. And has promised you eternity.

Being a mere spectator is—quite frankly-- a slap in God’s face.

Back on March 27, we celebrated the Gift of Easter: God conquered death for every single one of us through the resurrection of Jesus.

God has given you a worth that is not dependent upon the world’s expectations, comparisons and demands. But there are many who do not know. God needs us to share the good news. God is calling every single one of us to do our part.

I still remember when John Kennedy said, **“Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.”** And I wonder if today, we have turned it around to say, **“Ask not what I can do for my church; ask what can my church do for me.”**

If your satisfaction in life is not what you want, then perhaps the biggest problem is that you are not contributing to the work of the Kingdom, which is life-giving. **You receive so much when you give, when you participate.**

You don’t have to do something great; but you do need to do good things.

If someone gave you an opportunity to invest a little bit into a company that would give you such a return on your investment that you would never be needy again, would you sit by and do nothing?

That is what Jesus is offering you. This is what is in your hands. That is what you are invited to invest in today. Will you do what God has gifted you to do?

[Wait for “small things” to be written on cards, and then L A U N CH]

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.