



Westminster Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, TN
May 12, 2024
The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
Sermon: "A Joyful Sending"

Luke 24:44-53 (NRSV)

24:44 Then 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, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled."

24:45 Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures,

24:46 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,

24:47 and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

24:48 You are witnesses of these things.

24:49 And see, 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."

24:50 Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them.

24:51 While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.

24:52 And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy;

24:53 and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

"A Joyful Sending"

Is there joy in transition?

The author of Luke seems to think so. In its final verses, the gospel reports ‘great joy’ in the disciples:

*While Jesus was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with **great joy**; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.*

It sounds like quiet the party.

I remember distinctly trying to convince a 3-year-old and an 8-year-old that there is *great joy* in transition 9 months ago in a move from Asheville to Knoxville, where I would begin my work at this Church. I’ve told a few of you the story that in the initial days of the move our 3-year-old developed a stutter, something she had never experienced before. It was so much change all at once, her young brain just couldn’t process it all. The words would be there, but she just couldn’t get them out. She’d start a sentence and get stuck on the first word, “I’m...I’m...I’m...I’m...” Sometimes she would get stuck on a word for 30 seconds at a time.

Yea, there was a fair amount of dad guilt in those days. I’d moved the family to a different state and in the process, I’ve really stressed our toddler out.

The stutter improved over time. My son’s resentment about the move...not so much. I try to convince him, ‘look on paper, Knoxville looks great – a new soccer team, scouts, choir, loads of new friends.’ I’m finding, it’s hard to reason with an 8-year-old. He will always miss Asheville. He will always remind me that he misses Asheville. Transition is hard.

Which brings me back to the question about the ‘great joy’ of the disciples as Jesus ascends to heaven. They were losing him. And yet they felt joy.

Everywhere else in the Gospel, joy is a mark of gain rather than loss.

In its very first chapter of Luke, the angel prophesizes to Zachariah, father of John the Baptist, “You will have **joy** and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth” (Luke 1:14).

Likewise, the angels announce to the shepherds in their fields at night, “Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of **great joy** for all people: to you is

born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord” (Luke 2:10-12).

Luke ch. 2. Great joy at the arrival of the Savior.

Likewise, later in Luke, joy is the theme of the parables in which what was once lost is now found:

Jesus asks the disciples, *Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?...Just so, I tell you, there will be more **joy** in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.*

*Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it?...Just so, I tell you, there is **joy** in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents (from Luke 15:4-10).*

Two stories of joy, back-to-back. Over and over, joy over things found, joy in promises fulfilled in the Gospel, joy as a mark of gain rather than loss.

So, what to make of the disciple’s ‘great joy’ as Jesus departs to the heavens?

For one, the departure is only part of the story. In fact, Luke only devotes half a verse to the Ascension.

Much more, Luke wants us to focus on Jesus making sense of his final days to the disciples. Verse 45: “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.’”

This is a reoccurring motif of this final chapter in the Gospel of Luke.

The very first thing the angels say, in the empty tomb, to the women on Easter morning, is this: “Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” (Luke 24:6)

Likewise, right before our passage, there is the story of the risen Jesus’s mysterious appearance upon the Emmaus Road. After he was revealed to his followers in the

breaking of bread, “Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.” (Luke 24:27)

Three times in one chapter, the repetition of teaching the story of the crucified and resurrected savior, in accordance with the Scriptures. Joy in a community formed around a shared story.

That’s not the only thing the disciples rejoice over. This is not an insular community, always looked back on days gone by, nostalgic for the Savior who left them.

Instead, in these final verses, we see teaching *and sending*. Notice, immediately after Jesus opens their minds to the scriptures in v. 45, in the next breath he tells them, “that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in [my] name to all nations...you are my witnesses of these things.”

In fact, this point is so important, that the author of Luke and Acts makes it all over again in the first chapter of the next book. In the first chapter of Acts, Jesus repeats and expands this line: “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

All this brings us back to the great joy of the disciples in the final verses of the Gospel of Luke. Yes, it is a loss, in that Jesus takes leave of his disciples, but in his absence, a community forms, around a shared story of a Savior’s life, death, and resurrection - a story that they share and then go out, proclaiming to the world, for “You are my witnesses.” In the final verses of Luke, the community simultaneously loses Jesus and finds him, finds him in the body of Christ, the community formed in his name. It is a simultaneous loss and gain. It is ‘great joy.’

So, is there joy in transition? I could ask you that very question.

The Worship, Music, and Arts council met this past Thursday to debrief the listening sessions we have carried out over the last month following the announcement that Peter Van Eenam, Westminster’s long-time director of music would be retiring at the end of June. (For those of you visiting for the first time today, that’s Peter, over there, by the organ.)

As the worship council was meeting, our Parish Associate Gradye Parsons reminded us that this church has been in a constant state of transition for the past four years.

- Covid and the ensuing shutdown in March of 2020
- The unexpected departure of my predecessor in December of 2021
- An interim period and prolonged pastoral search, Easter of 2022 thru August of 2023
- And God bless you all, you're still getting used to me, 9 months in.

Transition, in our lives, in places we love, it's not always joyful, is it?

I've tried to put a positive, forward-looking spin on this transition with the questions that I've asked during the listening sessions. My final question has always been this: "What are you excited about, when you think about the coming transition to Westminster's music program?"

Many of you didn't take the bait.

One person answered that question with 2 words: "Not much." Which, honestly, has been my favorite answer to the question so far.

- 1) because it's so blunt, it's funny and
- 2) because it's honest.

Because you and I, in different ways, have been in a constant state of transition for 4 years. And even though this one, is of course, a joyful transition – We celebrate Peter's 42 years in this community – it's still a hard one. There's no getting around that.

In our 1 on 1 meeting, this week, I gave Peter a heads up that I was going to talk about the transition today in the sermon. I promised him two things:

- 1) I wouldn't make him the subject of every sermon from now until June and
- 2) I wouldn't compare him to Jesus

Though for some of you, after listening to these sessions over the past month, it wouldn't be too far a comparison. I've heard some of you say you have seen this man walk on water.

And, in fact, there is a clear line between today's passage and the situation we find ourselves in as a community today, in that we are both communities saying good-bye, and we are both communities called to faithfulness in the midst of transition.

And transitions are hard.

I've sometimes joked in these listening sessions: What if, a couple months after he leaves, we bring Peter back in a wig, and maybe a beard. Do you think members will still whisper in corners, still comparing him to his 'predecessor'? After 42 years, let's be honest, it's going to be a tough act to follow.

But in all honesty, despite that joke, I don't worry about that part of the transition. Because there's another answer, that I've heard repeatedly to that question about what excites you about this:

Every time, someone has said, that they will be excited, because they know, the success of the next person who follows Peter in this position will depend on us.

The success of the next person who follows Peter in this position will depend on us.

And after someone has said that in a listening session, over and over again, everyone in the room spoken up and agreed. The success of the next music director at Westminster Presbyterian Church will depend on each and every one of *you*, on each and every one on *us*, collectively.

That success means, certainly, honoring and continuing what has come before. But the way we honor it, is not to hang our heads low lamenting days gone by. Instead, it is asking, how does our history prepare us, to be faithful and open to the future God has in store for this community?

You see, the end of the Gospel of Luke invites us to see transition as invitation.

The church is always a community gathered around a sacred story, sent out into the world. And as it was sent, it became a community that found Jesus even as it lost him. Even as he left, they found Jesus in their midst, as they gathered in his name, and told his story, and bore witness to his love, in word and deed to the very ends of the earth.

We are the church today. We are a people gathered again around this sacred story, and we are likewise called, in all the transitions of our lives, by the invitation of the Spirit, not to turn inward but to look outward, remembering and honoring what we have been, while also keeping an eye out for who God is calling us to become. That is what the church does, in every season of its life.

So, in whatever transition you brought with you this morning, in however you are facing the transitions of this community, know that know that God is with you, in every season of life.

There is joy in the transition. It's not always a joyful transition, mind you. Some days, some months, some years are especially hard.

The joy is in the promise that we do not go through it alone. There is Christ in our midst. And Christ will carry us forward, as a people sent to faithfully be and become the Body of Christ, in God's good future.

And so, in whatever may come, we move forward, with that affirmation in our hearts, the one that says, 'Thanks be to God' in all transitions, and in all seasons of this life.

'Thanks be to God' Amen. and Amen.