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# HOW SHALL WE END?

LUKE 24:44-53

A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL

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BY THE REV. DR. LUKE A. POWERY

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We are standing underneath the canopy of God's blessing of all creation. It's inescapable and always predictable because that is who God is in Christ, covering us all with a blessing. And symbolically, right above me (and on your bulletin cover), at the very top of the wooden canopy, over my head, is not music in the air, but Christ the King blessing the world—his right hand raised in a blessing gesture and his left hand holding an orb as a sign of his dominion over the earth. He's got the whole world in his hands, literally. Perhaps, he's there also with his right-hand blessing, reminding us that each sermon is supposed to be a blessing to the hearers and for every preacher who stands in this pulpit to give a sermon, that wooden carving of Christ the King reminds us to pray, "Lord, bless this mess."

Christ lifts his right hand to offer God's blessing, God's benediction, literally, God's 'good word' over his followers. The image of Jesus offering a blessing is prominent in early Christian and Byzantine art—in the form of mosaics, stained-glass windows, sculptures, or paintings. The specific right-hand gesture of blessing you will see most frequently is Christ's first two fingers and his thumb extended and his third and fourth finger closed (what you see on the bulletin cover). As Christian art developed over time, this blessing gesture took on more theological significance. The three open fingers came to represent the Trinity (the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), and the two closed ones represented the dual nature of Christ as both human and divine. Christ the King raising his hand with a blessing gesture says something about who he is and what he does.

On this Ascension Sunday, we celebrate and mark the assumption of glory and power by the Crucified and Risen Christ who has taken his rightful place of authority at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. As the wood sculpture depicts, Christ wears a crown as King and in the Gospel of Luke, assumes this royal role as he ascends and is carried up into heaven. When the risen Jesus encounters his disciples on the road to Emmaus, we see his humanity through his walking, talking, taking, breaking, giving, eating, teaching, and touching. As some scholars note, "Christ died and rose that we might have eternal life; and he ascended that we might be given a share in his divinity, his continuing presence and, hence, life with God" (Don Saliers). He's human but gives us a share in his divinity.

And Jesus does to his disciples exactly what we see in the wooden image—he lifts his hands and blessed them and this blessing bestows his continuing presence and shares his divine and resurrected life because he wants them to be a part of him. He took on humanity that we might eventually share in his divinity and that happens through the power from on high he promises, who is the Holy Spirit.

Christ is King but he shares his power by blessing. We don't even know what he says at this point and we don't even need to know because we know what he does. He lifted up his hands and he blessed them. His gesture is of God and from God because even in our worship services when we conclude with a blessing or benediction, "[It] is not about what the people have to do once they have left the worship but about what God is going to continue doing in each person's life every day" (Melinda Quivik). This continuity is revealed when "while [Jesus] was blessing them, he was carried up into heaven" which means he never stopped blessing but his blessing continues even to today. Christ the King rules with blessings not by placing a burden on people. His lifting up of his hands is the lifting of the burdens from the backs of people. His rise to power and his throne signifies a reign that is known for its blessing, not for its wielding of oppression. Clearly, his power is used to empower others. His ascension is for the rise of others. His blessing is for resurrection.

"Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them." The gesture of blessing is important but so is where he blesses. Christ's blessing occurs in Bethany. Bethany, the place where he resurrected Lazarus, making Bethany a residence of resurrection, a site for getting up, for lifting up hands to bless and being carried up for an ascension. A blessing in Bethany is what lifts people up, gives them life, raises them higher like King Jesus. Christ's blessing can resurrect a dying soul because God's blessing is always for our resurrection, always

for life. Through his royal blessing, Christ tells the disciples that resurrection life is their present and future. They will rise, too. The blessing offered by Christ the King is the conveyance of the promise of God that God uttered in the beginning to our forefathers, “I will bless you and you will be a blessing to others.” But moreover, in this geographical setting of Bethany as a site of resurrection and the promise of the Holy Spirit to come, Christ’s blessing also embodies the words of the vision of Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones, “I will cause breath/spirit to enter you, and you shall live . . . I will put my spirit/breath within you, and you shall live. . .” (Ezek 37). Christ’s blessing is all about resurrection. The act of blessing is all about giving life.

We see this historically even in saying “God bless you” or “bless you” after someone sneezes. The origins of this are not clear but the overall purpose of this verbal blessing is. One theory is that this phrase originated in Rome during the bubonic plague in Europe. Sneezing was one of the plague’s main symptoms, and it’s said that Pope Gregory suggested that a prayer in the form of saying “God bless you” after a sneeze would protect the person from death. Another theory is that it comes from the ancient belief that a sneeze might accidentally expel the spirit from the body unless God blessed you and prevented it. Other cultures thought that sneezing forced evil spirits out of the body, leaving others exposed to the wandering spirits. A blessing, therefore, was to protect both the sneezer and those around him. Another possible origin story says that our hearts stop when we sneeze, and that saying, “bless you,” is a way of welcoming the sneezer back from the dead.

A blessing is all about resurrection. A blessing gesture in word or deed has always been about protection of and giving life to others, implicitly declaring “You shall live.” Christ’s blessing resurrects people in Bethany or in Durham. And the Gospel of Luke reveals that Christ’s ascending blessing lifts joy out of the disciples. The creation of joy is the result of his blessing. After Jesus is carried up, “they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.” His blessing led them to worship, filled them with joy, and caused them to bless God. His blessing resurrected in them their true lives and purpose, ones of joy and never-ending worship. This is what can happen when we leave the cursing corporation and start a blessing business as followers of Jesus.

The image of Christ the King blessing the world doesn’t just say something about who he is and what he does, but about who we are called to be. Christ’s blessing at the end of his earthly life shows us how to live out his life on earth. Christ’s final act in the theater of his human life is a gesture of blessing, not a command or charge or curse. But he ends with a blessing. The way he ends on earth should be the end of our lives, the goal of our lives, that is, to be givers of blessings, to bless all of God’s creation. Not only is Christ’s end a blessing, but the end of the Gospel of Luke ends by saying, “they were continually in the temple blessing God.” The end of the Gospel is a blessing too, blessing God. Luke begins his Gospel in the temple and ends it in the temple, reminding us that our beginning and our end is worship. The end of Christ on earth and the ends of Luke call us to our real end, beckoning us to a ministry of blessing.

Blessing is in the DNA of God and should be an aspect of every Christian’s ethic and rhetoric. Christ the King calls us to be bless-ers. And the gesture of blessing is a clear sign of our participation in the resurrection life of King Jesus, always striving to lift others up, and unintentionally through this same gesture, you will be resurrected, lifted higher in the life of faith, ascending with the blessing Christ.

What if we, as Christians, were known as a blessing people and not cursing ones? What if we saw our calling to be to offer blessings over people’s lives? With all of the current debates over social issues, we often can become so focused on who is right and who is wrong, and who is in and who is out, and see people as issues instead of human beings and then our goal is not to love the other, even if we disagree with them, but to be right. We can see the speck in our neighbor’s eye but neglect the log in our own (Matt 7:3-5). But Jesus is calling for another way in which our goal, our end, as Christians, is to bless someone else rather than take more interest in debates or in who’s right or wrong or the latest political or theological squabbles. Our end is to bless someone else and bless others like Christ the King did and does continually, nothing more or nothing less, because this is a sign that we’re participating in the crucified risen life of God in Christ. And Christ’s blessing is still resurrecting in Bethany, at Duke, and in Durham.

Therefore, as Easter Christians who believe in the resurrection, why don’t we start blessing people into the faith rather than scaring or arguing them into it? Why don’t we bless others to such an extent that they fall in love

with Jesus through our loving treatment of them? Why don't we bless others into salvation and bless others into knowledge of Christ and bless others into discipleship and bless others into the way of the Spirit and bless others into joy and bless others into the worship of God and bless others into the mission of God in the world? Why don't we bless?

Christ blessed the disciples despite themselves because a blessing has to do with who God is, not who we are. Through his final act on earth, Christ shows us how he wants to be remembered and followed. He lifted up his hands and blessed them. His end was a blessing. What kind of Christian do you want to be in the end? How do you want to be known and remembered? We don't know what Jesus said but we know what he did. How shall we end? What will be our legacy?

In the Spring Jazz Vespers service here in the Chapel, we had our usual prayers of the people that we do with various prayer stations set up where people can go and receive a blessing, anointing with oil, or light a candle. I was one of the ministers praying with people who wanted a blessing. At the end of the prayer line, a man who was the last person to come for prayer approached me. I asked him what he needed pray for and he said that he didn't come to receive prayer, but to pray for me. He wanted to pray for me and bless me. I thought, as the ordained minister, I was giving the blessing but through this modern-day disciple, Christ blessed me because that's who Christ is and what Christ continually does over our heads and in our lives. He rules by blessing us with resurrection and on that night, something within me rose higher.

And I'm not alone in recognizing the blessing of a blessing. Pastor Heidi Havercamp tells a story about Matt who grew up in the Episcopal Church. One Sunday he appeared at the altar—with his arms crossed over his chest and he continued to do this Sunday after Sunday, and she began to worry. Why wasn't he receiving communion? Was he in a spiritual crisis? She waited a few months, trying not to overreact. Eventually, she sent him an email about it. He responded pretty quickly and said: "I actually just love receiving a blessing each week. Something about [it] is really comforting to me. Every so often, I will get communion, but for me, I get a lot more out of a blessing!" He gets more alright. He gets resurrected.

Bless someone today. It may be the lift that they need to cause them to rise because Christ's blessing is an Easter act of resurrection. The Lord bless you, now and forever. Amen.