
Final Instructions

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 1 June 2025

Acts 1:1-11 • Luke 24:36-49



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

We should actually have our two readings today the other way around, with the Gospel first and then the passage from Acts, for that would show the actual sequence of events. Acts is a continuation of Luke, popularly considered to have been written by Luke. Luke and Acts are like parts 1 and 2 of the same story. This is a story which began at Jesus' birth, tells of his mission on earth, his death and then rising at Easter, continues through the appearance to the disciples, the lifting up of Jesus into heaven (which we hear about today), and the coming of the Spirit, which we commemorate next Sunday at Pentecost.

There is so much in this Gospel passage to think about. It is full of both literal and symbolic meaning. The literal meaning is the truth of the resurrection. Jesus had told the disciples that he would rise again, although they didn't really understand him. But now, here he is, in the flesh, standing in front of the disciples! There is no question of, "Oh, the women told us he had risen, but we

doubted their story.” Jesus invites them to touch him, to feel him, to feel his flesh and bones. This is no ghost, but the true, living Lord Jesus. He eats a piece of fish in their presence. This may seem a bit theatrical, like the ventriloquist who drinks a glass of water while his dummy continues speaking. But it is revealing. This is no vision, but the true, living Lord Jesus. And how lovely that Jesus chooses to eat fish, which represents the very livelihoods of several of the disciples. It is something they have seen him do countless times, after they brought their catch to the beach. John’s Gospel also tells a story about fish and the resurrection — he is speaking their language.

Jesus goes on to give them their final instructions, and he works in their brains and their hearts to give them complete understanding of the Holy Scriptures. From now on, the disciples have a solid foundation from which to spread the word about Jesus. They have seen him, risen and alive, and no shadow of doubt remains. They have absolute faith in him, and in the truth of the news they will bring the world.

Symbolically, we see here the beginning of the church. We speak of the church as the body of Christ. As he talks to the disciples, he encourages them to look at and touch his body. And he talks about their mission: to preach “the message about repentance and the forgiveness of sins” to all nations (Luke 24:47). That is the duty of the church. Christ’s body symbolises the church, for in him is all truth and the love that wants to share that truth with the world. The disciples will preach about the risen Christ, which they have seen, in true bodily form; and they themselves will form the church which is his body. As we are in Christ, we are in the church; and our duty is to welcome all people into that close relationship with him.

And now, Jesus is saying farewell to his disciples, farewell to the crowd, farewell to the earthly life he has shared with us for thirty-odd years. Luke tells us that he appeared to them many times in the forty days following the crucifixion, and he talked to them about the Kingdom of God. As we see all through the Gospels, Jesus was preparing his disciples to carry on the work that he did. He must leave; but they would remain, and they have their work cut out for them. The work of spreading the Gospel is only just beginning. Over the next days and weeks and months and years they will discover the scope of that work and how great is the task: to bring the Gospel not just to Jerusalem, but to all Israel and Judah; not just to Israel and Judah, but to all the countries around the Mediterranean; not just to those countries, but to the whole world. And not just to the Jews but to all people everywhere. It is a work which only begins with them and has already lasted two thousand years, and is still not finished.

It would be an impossible work if it weren't for Jesus’ parting gift: the Holy Spirit, sometimes known as the Helper. Without the help of the Helper, we

would be helpless. For Jesus was not really leaving them, even though their hearts must have been sinking as they watched him ascend into heaven. He had told them once that they should be glad that he is going to his Father. For the moment, they were surely sad to see him go; but even as he leaves, he sends two of his angels to reassure the disciples that he would “come back in the same way that you saw him go to heaven” (Acts 1:11), that is, enveloped in a cloud, a cloud of glory. We all have that to look forward to, though we do not know when it will happen: tomorrow, next week, next century. And it doesn’t matter, because it will happen in God’s good time, when the time is right. We who have the promise of eternal life will see it happen.

There’s a moment in most people’s lives when they have to stop learning and start doing. It may be when you leave high school or university, or when you move out on your own, away from your parents’ house. That’s how it was for the apostles. They had been having a master class with the Lord for three years or so, during which he taught them what they needed to know. Now they must graduate and go out on their own. They likely feel that they aren’t quite prepared for what will come. They will make some mistakes, of course. But they go forth. Following the coming of the Spirit on Pentecost, we see Peter really stepping up to this responsibility. Of course, he is not doing this on his own, but Jesus no longer takes him by the hand as he did before. Instead, Jesus works through the Holy Spirit, through Peter’s mind and heart. With that inspiration, Peter is able to go forward.

We too may feel that we are not ready for God’s mission. We have received instruction from Jesus through the Bible, from the words of preachers and teachers, and from our fellow Christians; but it is still difficult to feel confident about proclaiming the word in this troubled and secular world. But we too have the gift of the Holy Spirit. Remember that the apostles are remembered today not because of their own skills or cleverness, and not because they were better people than we are. They are remembered because they were given, and accepted, the inspiration from God through the Spirit. We have that too.

So, on this Ascension Day, remember all of Jesus’ gifts, and rest secure in the knowledge that Jesus is with us, and some day will return; for which we thank our God in heaven. Amen.