

**“Many Forms of Blessing”**  
**Luke 24:44–53**  
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One of the standard elements of worship is a benediction which comes at the very end of the service. It is a word of blessing to all as we depart. It is not supposed to be a recap of the sermon or an attempt to cover ground that may have been missed, though one can never tell what we preacher types will do, no matter what the element is supposed to be.

A retired minister in another setting where I served was asked by a family to have a prayer in a funeral. He thought he should have been asked to deliver a eulogy. So, when it came time for his prayer, he addressed God, and fifteen minutes later, said “Amen.” In between the beginning and ending of that “prayer,” he delivered his eulogy. Some ministers will offer more than a benediction at the end of a service.

But a benediction is a blessing as you go, and you are familiar with some of these. I often use an adaptation of a John Claypool benediction. “Always remember that it was by the grace of God that you were brought into this world, it is by the mercy of God *and the work of the Holy Spirit* that you have been sustained to this very moment, and it is by the love of God, *fully* revealed in Jesus *the* Christ that you are being redeemed now and forevermore (italics my additions).”

Most church folk are familiar with the words of 2 Corinthians 13:13, “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you.” And we know the Aaronic benediction of Numbers 6:24–26, “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face go shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.”

We may even know the story behind the Vulcan blessing in *Star Trek*, “Live long and prosper.” Leonard Nimoy decided to reflect a Jewish ritual of blessing by holding his hand in the form of the Hebrew letter *shin* which is the first letter in the word *Shaddai*, a name for God. And this hand sign is used in a traditional benediction. So, the simple Sci Fi series blessing is shaped by

Jewish tradition, whether the people who mimic it know this or not. It's like our parting word, "Good-bye." It is short for, "God be with you," though many people don't know this.

There are many forms of blessing, some we speak, some we sing, but the point of them all is to send us away affirmed, lifted up, encouraged.

This is what Jesus offers his disciples at the end of Luke, our reading today, a common text for Ascension. Jesus offers a sermon too, what someone has called a last lecture with footnotes (Katherine Willis Pershey, *The Christian Century*, May 2024, p. 25). He talks about his life as fulfillment of the law, prophets, and psalms; he talks about his death and resurrection; and he calls the disciples to be witnesses of these things. But then, he lifts up his hands and blesses them, perhaps with his hands in the sign of a *shin*, and this is the last thing he does.

In fact, the text says, "While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven." That is, he is still in the process of blessing when he ascends. This is the last thing the disciples experience with the Risen Christ. Theologian Thomas Troeger makes this observation. "This is how the Gospel ends, not with a bang or a whimper, not with a curse or a judgment, but with the ceaseless blessing of Christ (*Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 2, p. 525)."

The first disciples are moved to worship. Two millennia later, we are still profoundly grateful that this is what Jesus chooses to leave with us, not a word of challenge or judgment but a word of blessing. For a blessing is no small thing, it is often what keeps us on our feet.

Many people are richly blessed by those around them. On this Mother's Day, we might think of mothers who have affirmed and blessed us. I think of my grandmother who called me "an angel a'walkin'." I didn't take her words literally, but I was encouraged by them. I also think of the African-American woman who cares for white children in the book and film *The Help* who says to children in her care, "You is smart, you is kind, you is important." We know the influence such simple words of blessing have upon children as they develop. It doesn't matter who speaks them, as long as someone does.

But there are people who spend their lives seeking a blessing they never receive. We had a family member who took his own life at forty. There were

several factors involved, but a central part of his struggle was his parents' unwillingness to offer a blessing for who he was. They cursed him throughout his life, beat him down emotionally, so much so that when his business, the only thing he had to attach worth to his life and show his parents, collapsed, he felt like he had no reason to live.

This is a distinctive story, with more details than I am naming here, but it is not an isolated one. I cannot count the number of people I have worked with who have been tormented by the absence of a blessing, and often the presence of a curse — for being different, for pursuing the “wrong” career, for marrying the “wrong” person or not marrying at all.

Words can keep us on our feet, or they can tear us apart. The book of James says the tongue is a fire. “With it, we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not be so (James 3:6, 9-10).” How grateful we are that Jesus uses words to bless, affirm, and encourage!

And this is not just the case at the end of his journey. Throughout his ministry, he blesses and encourages. He challenges people at times and has harsh words for those who use religion to oppress others. But most of his time is spent helping people see the good in themselves, people like Zacchaeus, the woman at the well, the man born blind.

Jesus teaches and heals, he tells people about how God works and thus brings God's realm near, and he helps people see the potential God has placed within them. Even his sacrificial death and resurrection are acts to redeem, to free and empower, to bless and encourage people to be who they really are — God's beloved children.

In his book *The Struggle to Be Free* pastoral care pioneer Wayne Oates described his experience of blessing in this way (p. 43-44).

The Word of God, the Logos, the person of Jesus Christ, was my redemption from feelings of inferiority. From then on I felt it a divine imperative never to think of any human being as inferior to me, nor, at the same time, to think of any human being as superior to me. From then on I began to look *across* at all people. I work at this as my daily discipline; to walk *humbly* with God and

*comradely* with people. For all of us are made in the image of God. All of us are bought with the same price of the death of Jesus Christ. All of us who once were ‘no people’ are now the ‘people of God.’

Such is the nature of Christ’s blessing. Jesus spends his ministry offering affirmation and encouragement. He dies and is raised to offer us the deepest kind of acceptance. And he leaves this world ascending into the heavens with words of blessing on his lips for us all.

Yet, as we say this, we need to acknowledge the elephant in the room for many in our time when it comes to Ascension Sunday — this idea of Jesus ascending. Are we to take this story literally? Is this a “beam me up, Scotty” preview? Does Jesus actually rise into the sky? There is sacred art, for example, in the vaulting of the Peterborough Cathedral, which suggests he does. Among other symbols of our faith, we see in that vaulting the soles of Jesus’ feet as he rockets skyward.

An image in the vaulting is an appropriate way to represent a literal ascension. We have to look up to see it, but not only do people in this time have questions about such a thing happening — contemporary cosmology means that this doesn’t even make sense. We no longer believe that the earth is flat, we are down here, and heaven is up there.

We live on one planet in one solar system which is part of just one of hundreds of billions, if not trillions, of galaxies, not to mention how many universes there might be. There is no “up and down,” there is only out there; and even beyond all these scientific understandings, theologically speaking, God isn’t just out there, God is right here.

For Jesus to ascend to be with God makes sense in a first-century cosmology, but not in ours today. So, we may be well-served to read this story less literally, to acknowledge simply that Jesus is departing this world, this time, this dimension, to be with God.

And yet, Thomas Troeger suggests there is something in this imagery we might want to retain (*Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 2, p. 523). “Up and down” thinking may have left our cosmology, he says, but it has not left our sense of wellbeing and spirituality. We speak of standing up for justice,

looking up in hope, pulling ourselves up, feeling up, reaching up. We have an upward yearning deep within our very being that gives us the strength we need to live.

Jesus lifts us up with his life and ministry, with his death and resurrection, with his parting gift of perpetual blessing and his departure. This latter reality may not at first make sense. We would prefer that Jesus remain in this world. But in John 16, he says he must go so that the Spirit can come to guide and strengthen us (John 16:7).

The Ascension is more than an explanation for why we don't see Jesus walking around. It's a way of making space for the work of the Spirit, and it's a way of freeing the church to continue Jesus' ministry. He is no longer here, so we are called to continue his work, and the Spirit empowers us for this calling. This too is a blessing. We are not just affirmed as creatures of worth. God entrusts to us the work of God's realm. That is affirmation and liberation to be who we are called to be.

I experienced this kind of blessing in an unusual way during the search process that led to our moving to Raleigh fifteen years ago. I had not sensed a calling to leave the church I served in Winston-Salem, but I felt a tug in this direction. Two things held me back — Dana's mother had dementia and we were her father's help in providing care, and Ian and Ali were rising sixth and eleventh graders, difficult ages to move.

Two things happened to free my thinking. Dana's father agreed that it was in her mother's best interest for her to move to the memory care unit at Salemtowne Retirement Community. Then Ian, fifteen at the time, returning from District Band Camp at Appalachian State University, told Dana that he thought I might not be considering a move because of him and his sister. "We'll be okay," he said, "We'll make new friends." I'm not sure he had permission to speak for his sister, but these were mature words for a fifteen-year-old, and they freed me to say "yes" to a conversation about coming here. It was the blessing I needed.

That's what God-in-Christ offers us again and again in many different ways — the freedom to be who we are called to be. Jesus leaves this world offering a blessing, and he continues to bless us to this day.