**THE GOSPEL OF LUKE**

**THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH**

**Luke 24:36-53**

**INTRODUCTION**

We have come to the end of our series in Luke’s Gospel after over two years in this incredible book written. When the series began, I mentioned that my five-year-old daughter Lily would be eight by the time we finished this series, but I was wrong. She turns eight in two weeks, so I was off by fourteen days.

It’s amazing that the words written by a 1st century physician continue to have such power and relevance to life in the 21st century. But when we remember that he was writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit – writing not only his words, but God’s– it comes as no surprise that we have been impacted so deeply.

This has been a rich journey for me personally, and for us as a church. I originally chose the Gospel of Luke for a simple reason: I wanted to know Jesus more. I wanted to love Jesus, not just for what he did, but for who he was. I wanted to come into a deeper gratitude for the work of Jesus by coming into a deeper relationship with the person of Jesus. And after this two year journey, I can honestly say that I love Jesus more than ever.

That’s because walking through Luke has been like walking with Jesus. We have followed Jesus in his ministry to the town and villages, healing the sick, showing compassion to sinners, and teaching his disciples about the Kingdom of God. We have gone with him to Jerusalem where he was rejected by his people, betrayed by one of his closest friends, and delivered to the authorities to be unjustly condemned. And we have felt the sorrow of seeing him crucified like a common criminal and buried in a borrowed grave, a Saviour slain by sinners.

But as we entered Luke’s final chapter, our sorrow turned to joy as we witnessed Jesus’ resurrection. The stone has been rolled away, the tomb is empty, and the angels are announcing that Jesus is not here, but has risen. And then Jesus starts appearing to his disciples, first to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, and then to Simon Peter. It’s becoming apparent to all that Jesus is alive! God has raised him from the dead, proving that Jesus’ death was all part of God’s plan to save the world. Jesus’ death would be God’s way of bringing life to all who trust him.

And so, as Luke’s Gospel draws to a close, ending on this high note of the resurrection, it seems that we’re headed towards a happy ending, because every good story has a happy ending, and there’s no better story than the story of Jesus.

But here’s the thing: the story isn’t ending; it’s only beginning. Part One – the story of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection – may be complete, but Part Two – the story of the church – is just about to begin. That’s why Luke wrote two volumes. The first volume is the book of Luke (the story of Jesus) and the second volume is the book of Acts (the story of the church). The story of the church is still the story of Jesus, of course. The only difference will be that Jesus will be working through his people, filled with his Spirit, rather than doing it all himself.

This is now our story. We live in Part Two as the story of the church continues to unfold all around us and through us. That’s why our text today is so important. Jesus is about to give his marching orders, not only to the apostles, but to the church – marching orders that have been preserved in Scripture and handed down to us through the centuries.

The title of this sermon is **The Mission of the Church.** My aim today is to show you that the mission of the church is **Reaching the Nations with the Gospel in the Power of the Spirit.**

We’re going to have four points today that all have to do with verses 47-53, so before we get there, let’s work our way through verses 36-46 first.

Our text begins with a discussion among the disciples. The two disciples from Emmaus have just arrived in Jerusalem to tell the eleven apostles and the rest of the disciples that Jesus had just appeared to them. They’re expecting this to be big news, but it’s not, because the Jerusalem disciples are already talking about another appearance. Simon Peter, the chief of the apostles, had also seen Jesus, and was telling everyone that Jesus had risen from the dead.

There’s excitement in the air, a kind of breathless wonder at what was happening around them, and what it might mean. And then, in the middle of all this excitement, verse 36 says that “Jesus himself stood among them, and said to them, ‘Peace to you!’” This is the moment they had been waiting for! Jesus was finally there, in the flesh, offering God’s blessing of peace to them. But rather than respond with joy and laughter, verse 37 says “they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit.”

It turns out that all the talk about Jesus was just that. Talk. There was excitement, there was energy, but there wasn’t much faith at all. If there was, they wouldn’t have responded with fear. They would have responded with joy.

This shows us that it’s one thing to talk about Jesus. It’s a whole other thing to believe in him. The disciples were talking about the resurrection, and sharing reports about the resurrection, but when the actual proof of the resurrection was staring them straight in the face in the person of Jesus himself, they doubted. Doubt is the issue here. Jesus makes that clear in verse 38 when he asks, “Why are you troubled, and why do *doubts* arise in your hearts?”

As we have seen, doubt has been one of the main themes of Chapter 24. In the aftermath of the cross, the disciples were full of doubt. Doubts about who Jesus was. Doubts about God’s intentions to save them. Doubts about their future as a nation. And here, even when they can see Jesus with their own eyes, they’re still doubting. This shows us that doubt doesn’t dissolve overnight. It lingers like a bad smell. You need two things to get rid of it: the fresh air of faith, and a whole lot of time.

That’s what Jesus wants to do. He wants to fan the fresh air of faith into their souls, so that they will stop doubting and believe, and he does this by proving to them that he’s not a spirit. He’s a real, resurrected man. He invites them to see his hands and his feet, which would have been scarred by the nails that had driven through his flesh and into the cross. He invites them to touch him so that they could see for themselves that he was made of flesh and bone. And as they begin to believe and respond with joy in verse 41, he asks them for food, and he eats a piece of broiled fish right there in front of them.

There’s no question about it. Jesus appeared to them, not as a spirit, not as a hallucination, not as a figment of their imagination, but as a man. A real man, risen from the dead, made up of flesh and blood with a human body and human appetites.

That’s not all Jesus did to dissolve their doubts. He didn’t just want them to believe that he had risen from the dead. He wanted them to believe that his resurrection had been God’s plan all along! To do that, Jesus turns to the Scriptures. He opens up the Bible to show them that everything that had just happened was meant to happen according to God’s Word. In verse 44 he actually says that he had already taught them these things, but they hadn’t understood. They needed something else, something beyond themselves, to truly understand and believe.

This is what Jesus offers them now in verse 45 as “he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures”. What was unclear before the cross now becomes crystal clear, and it’s not because they have a better perspective. It’s because Jesus *acted* upon them. Their closed minds were opened by Jesus, so that they could understand what they could not understand before and believe that the cross and the resurrection had been part of God’s plans all along.

That brings us to verses 47-49, as Jesus turns the attention from himself to the church, because the Scriptures don’t just speak about him. It speaks about them.

Jesus is about to expound the Scriptures in order show them their place in God’s unfolding redemptive plan. They have a role to play, and that role is our role. That’s why we want to take our time through the next few verses, as Jesus explains what the Scriptures foretold we would do. Let’s break this down into four points.

(1) **THE MESSAGE**

Jesus says in verse 47 that the Scriptures foretold that “repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name” (i.e. the Christ’s name, Jesus’ name).

At the heart of the church’s mission is a *message*. We live in a time when “missions work” is defined so broadly that people who go overseas to dig wells or build schools say that they’re doing “missions work”. Those are certainly good things, but they’re not the things that Jesus calls us to do in verse 47 unless the message is being proclaimed as well.

A few years ago it was popular for Christians to say something like, “Preach the gospel always, and if necessary use words”. Earlier in my Christian walk, some of my friends embraced this saying, believing that it was more important to do good works than to share the good news of the gospel. This is a dangerous idea. It’s false teaching, but like most false teaching, the reason why it gained traction among the Christian community was because it contained a kernel of truth within it. That’s how false teaching works. It sneaks into Christian thought because it contains just enough truth within it to make it palatable, and even attractive.

The truth here is that our lives are just as important to our witness as our words. There’s no question that this is true. The Bible calls Christians to live worthy of the gospel. We are to adorn the gospel by the way that we live to help people see the transformative beauty of the gospel.

But the dangerous mistruth contained within this saying is that it implies that we can preach the gospel with our works, without our words, and that is patently false. Living the gospel never comes at the expense of speaking the gospel in the Bible, because no one is going to come to saving faith in Christ just by looking at your life. Faith comes from *hearing* the Word (Romans 10:17), not just from seeing its effects.

Jesus has commissioned the church to bring a message to the world, and if we are to be faithful to him, we are to go not just with our works, but our words. That doesn’t mean that everyone here is called to become a preacher. But it does mean that you want to support and partner with ministries and church-planting movements that are fully committed to the words of Jesus, and not just works.

But what are we to say? What is at the heart of this gospel message? Jesus tells us in verse 47. We are to proclaim a message “of repentance and forgiveness of sins”. There are all sorts of messages out there, messages that God wants to rescue you out of poverty, or prosper your bank account, or give you victory over whatever troubles you. That’s not the message Jesus has sent us out to proclaim. The message he has sent us out to proclaim is that you can be forgiven of your sins. This message – the message of God’s forgiveness freely offered in Christ Jesus – is the best news that we have to offer anyone, because people need forgiveness of sins way more than they need relief from their circumstances.

And the only way to receive this forgiveness is to repent: to turn away from sin in contrition, and to turn towards God through faith in Christ. That’s what Jesus means when he says this message should be proclaimed “in his name”. This isn’t just good news. It’s the good news of Jesus Christ, because it was his life, his death, and his resurrection that makes the forgiveness of sins possible. And if we turn from our sin and turn towards God through faith in Christ, God will forgive us of all our sins.

This reminds us that Jesus doesn’t just offer to meet people where they’re at. He does that, but then he also calls them to get up from where they’re at and to join him where he’s at in living a life of obedience and holiness.

This is what the church is called to do. We are called to steward and proclaim a message of repentance and forgiveness of sins.

(2) **THE MISSION**

That’s our message, but what is our mission? Who are we to bring this message to? Jesus tells us, again in verse 47. This message of “repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to *all nations*, beginning from Jerusalem.”

Jesus doesn’t just have a heart for the Jewish people. His love isn’t limited. He wants the message of the gospel to go forth to all nations so that people of every tribe, language, and nation would receive the forgiveness of sins.

This was a radical thing for Jesus to say, because the Jews weren’t thinking on this level at all. Yes, they believed that Jesus would bring redemption, but they thought it would be for Israel, not the rest of the world. When Jesus was talking to Cleopas on the road to Emmaus, Cleopas wasn’t sad because it seemed that the hope of the nations had been killed. He was sad because he thought that Jesus would be the one to redeem *Israel*. But here in verse 47, Jesus reveals the full scope of his redemptive plans as he calls the church to bring the gospel to *all nations*.

This wasn’t easy for the Jews, and it certainly isn’t easy for us. Human nature doesn’t like change. We like to settle in, we like to get comfortable, we like to sink our roots deep in a specific place among a specific people and call that place home. But going to the nations changes that. It requires us to get very uncomfortable, and to reach people who are very different from us.

Sometimes that means uprooting your family and moving to another country, but that’s not always the case, especially not in Canada, because in God’s providence, the nations have come to us. For us, reaching the nations may mean knocking on your neighbour’s door. It may mean connecting with people at the community center. It may mean reaching out to the international students who are sitting at the other end of the auditorium.

Whatever it may be, however it may look, Jesus wants us to look at people from other nations and think, “The gospel is just as much for them as it is for me.” It doesn’t matter if they speak a different language or have different beliefs. Jesus wants us to reach those people with the message of the gospel, because it is only by proclaiming the message of repentance and forgiveness of sins in Jesus’ Name that they can be saved.

I thank God that we are part of a family of churches that is committed to reaching the nations. Just two weeks ago during our regional meetings we heard reports from two of the pastors in our region who had recently travelled to Brazil. Over a period of two weeks, they met with Brazilian pastors in Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Rio Grande to encourage them and strengthen them in their ministries. Our region voted to donate $3,000 to help produce a music album of Sovereign Grace songs that would be sung in Portuguese. Why? Because we care about reaching the nations. We want the gospel of repentance and forgiveness of sins to go forth in all the nations, not just ours.

I could tell you about so many other things that the Lord is doing through Sovereign Grace. How our friends Michael and Kenean Granger are in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia right now laying the foundation for a church plant, or about how our sister church in Dayton Ohio is preparing to send one of their precious families to plant a church in Turkey. I could tell you about how three American families have recently uprooted their lives to move to the Isaan region of Thailand to plant a church among one of the least reached people groups in the world, or about how our Pastors’ College has more international students than ever including a young leader of an underground church. I could tell you about how our very own Pastor Tim has been involved in mentoring and caring for pastors in Bolivia and Croatia, or about how we are hosting Pastors’ Conferences in Mexico, the Philippines, and Zambia.

I could tell you about how we are preparing to send our very own Rachel Parenteau to Scotland to serve with the 20schemes church planting movement and about how so many of you have sacrificially decided to support her, but we just don’t have enough time. We may be a small church that is part of a small family of churches, but the Lord is doing marvelous work among the nations through us.

Jesus wants us to reach the nations, and it is an absolute privilege to do that in his Name through our family of churches.

(3) **THE POWER**

We know the message, we know the mission, but what about the means? How are we to carry out this mission? From a worldly perspective, reaching the nations seems like an impossible task, and it is, if we were left on our own. But we’re not. Jesus will give us the gift of his Spirit to empower us in this mission.

Jesus doesn’t mention the Spirit in verse 49, but it’s clear that’s who he is speaking about. He calls the Spirit “the promise of my Father”, and then he instructs them to “stay in the city until [they] are clothed with power from on high.” We know in Luke’s second volume, the Book of Acts, that the disciples stayed in Jerusalem, huddled together in one place, until the Holy Spirit came upon them with the sound of a rushing wind and the appearance of tongues of fire. That’s when they left that place and went out, first to the city, and then to the region, and then to the nations.

The Spirit is the promise of God the Father, and he is sent by God the Son. Let’s not miss this. Jesus is demonstrating his divine authority here, in telling the disciples that the Spirit of God goes where Jesus sends him. And whoever he sends the Spirit to, there rests the very power of God.

That’s what the church will need to fulfill the mission in bringing the message of repentance and forgiveness to the nations. It will need the divine power that comes from the Holy Spirit. We know that every believer has the Holy Spirit. We are sealed with him as a guarantee of our inheritance. But the power of the Spirit is manifested differently from believer to believer. It may be because we’ve grieved the Spirit through our sin. It may be because we’ve quenched the Spirit through our unbelief. It may even be because God has simply chosen to withhold the full power of his Spirit and wants us to cry out to him for it. Whatever it is, Jesus makes it clear that we need the power of the Spirit to fulfill our mission.

This is no less than a call to prayer. Didn’t Jesus just teach in Luke 11 that if we who are evil know how to give good gifts to our children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who *ask him*? It’s no coincidence that Jesus waited to be filled with the Holy Spirit before he went into the wilderness to be tempted, or that as he began his ministry he declared that “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to proclaim good news to the poor”. Jesus has shown us our need for the Spirit by depending on the Spirit himself.

We desperately need the Spirit. We need the Spirit to give us boldness. We need the Spirit to give us his gifts. We need the Spirit to cause the gospel to go forth not only in word, but in power and with full conviction (1 Thess. 1:5).

Jesus is telling us in verse 49 that we cannot accomplish this mission by ourselves. We need to be clothed with power from on high that comes from the Spirit alone. If we don’t, we will either shrink back from declaring the whole counsel of God because of fear or shame, or we will scatter the seeds of the gospel on the hardened ground of sinner’s hearts. We need the Spirit, which means that we need to pray that Jesus would send the promise of his Father to us.

(4) **THE CHURCH**

Lastly, Luke’s Gospel ends with a beautiful picture of the church in verses 50-53.

Jesus leads the disciples out of Jerusalem to Bethany, and lifts up his hands in benediction as he prays one final blessing over them. As he does so, he is carried up into heaven, leaving the disciples behind once again.

By now we know the disciples well enough to expect that such an event would cause them to fear and tremble. After all, when Jesus left them the first time when he died on the cross, they ran away terrified and hid away in a room. But something has changed in these disciples. They don’t cower in fear or wallow in their doubts. Verse 52 says “they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God.”

There couldn’t be a more fitting ending. Darrell Bock notes that Luke’s Gospel began in the Temple with a solitary priest who was waiting for the hope of Israel, and now it ends in the Temple with a multitude of disciples who had seen that hope and are giving thanks to God for him.

This is the true essence of the church. Yes, we are called to mission, to reach the nations with the message of the gospel in the power of the Spirit, but at the most fundamental level, what we are is a worshipping community. We are people who have been so transformed by the gospel that we come to God with great joy, continually blessing him for what he has done through Christ.

We must never forget that we are worshippers first, and missionaries second. As John Piper so memorably put it, “Missions exists because worship doesn’t.” Worship is the ultimate end of missions, which means that if we don’t function as a worshipping community, we’ve missed the whole point. If we come to church Sunday after Sunday with zero desire in our hearts for God, and not an ounce of joy for how he has saved us, then let’s not talk about missions as if it’s only the people out there who need the gospel. Let’s remember that we need the gospel as well. We need the joy of knowing that God has forgiven us, that we might go forth to the nations with a song in our mouths and praise in our hearts for this great salvation.

 **CONCLUSION**

As we close, you may be wondering where to begin. You’ve heard this call to reach the nations, you’ve received this commission from our Lord Jesus, but you’re left wondering, how? How do we do that? Where do we even start?

Let me briefly suggest three things.

First, and most importantly, we must cultivate a heart of gospel-gratitude. If we are unmoved by how God has forgiven us, we will be unmoved by how God wants to forgive others. There’s a direct correlation between how much we care about reaching the lost and how much we care about how God has reached us. We need to learn to rehearse the gospel daily, to never get over the awe of our own conversions. All of us were dead in our trespasses and sins. All of us were the objects of God’s wrath. All of us were saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone because of the loving initiative of God.

So when we spend time with the Lord, let’s make it a habit of rehearsing the gospel, not just as objective facts, but as subjective realities. Remember your sins and bring them to the Lord. If no sins come to mind, remember that you’re a sinner and still inclined to all evil. And then remember that God sent his Son to die in your place for your sins, so that you could be forgiven, cleansed, and reconciled to himself. Do this every day, throughout the months and the years, and you’ll find your heart changing towards the lost.

Second, we must pray. Prayer has been one of the central themes of the last few chapters of Luke, and rightly so, because so much of the church’s mission depends on prayer. If a church is struggling with outreach, or missions, or evangelism, all you have to do is look at the prayer meetings to find out why. There will be almost no one there! Prayer is the fuel for missions. If we are to reach the nations, we must begin on our knees. Come pray with us at our Wednesday prayer meetings. Come pray with us before the service. Come pray with us during our King’s World outreach, because we need the Holy Spirit, and the Father only gives the Spirit to those who ask.

Lastly, we must act. We must prayerfully consider what God might call us to do to reach the nations. It could be as simple as supporting a missionary through prayer and finances. It could mean knocking on your neighbour’s door. It could mean going on a short-term missions trip or even exploring the possibility that God may be calling you to move to another nation. I believe that if all of us, as individuals, as families, and as a church, commit ourselves to doing whatever we can to fulfill this great commission among the nations, God will move mightily, not only in the world, but in our lives, because there is no greater joy than to bring the good news of the death and resurrection of Christ to the nations.