

Up and out: Luke 24:44-53

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by [Mary Hinkle Shore](#) in the [May 1, 2007](#) issue

A worship professor voices frustration at students who conclude a Gospel reading with “Here ends the Gospel.” “The gospel doesn’t *end*,” my colleague insists. “The gospel is the good news—then and now!” Reading the endings of the canonical Gospels, one imagines that the four evangelists would agree with him. Each of them has difficulties wrapping things up.

Matthew ends with what at first appears to be a tidy conclusion on a mountain in Galilee. The risen Jesus commissions the 11 remaining disciples to make more disciples, to teach and to baptize. It looks like an ending, except that Jesus’ last words are, “I am with you always, to the close of the age.” What kind of an ending is it when the main character is still on the scene, promising to remain forever?

By contrast, Mark’s Gospel ends with no one on the scene. “In the original ending of Mark,” Richard Lischer observes, “the disciples and women are like projectiles emanating from some Big Bang.” One is left with the feeling that the gospel *cannot* end there. How would we know as much as we do—how could Mark have written as much as he did—if they had truly “said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid”?

John’s Gospel ends at the end of chapter 20, and then begins and ends again with chapter 21. Beverly Gaventa suggests that “this narrative cannot close on a world whose equilibrium is restored or only modestly altered. Following this narrative, nothing can remain unchanged.” Jesus fills the second ending with an excessive catch of fish, a breakfast for the disciples, a conversation with Peter, information about the beloved disciple, and more. One gets the sense that Jesus could keep up this type of interaction for some time.

Of the four evangelists, Luke alone writes an actual exit scene for the risen Jesus, yet even here the story strains forward, leaning into a future where the disciples are

witnesses for Jesus to the ends of the earth. At the end of the Gospel, the story does not stop as much as it pauses for instruction from Jesus and joy on the part of the disciples. Reading the ascension story alongside those disciples means praising God for what we have already witnessed and for what we expect from a power that will inspire future witness.

The disciples have had the experience of traveling with Jesus, of watching him work and hearing him teach. They have seen him arrested and know how he suffered and died. Now, risen from the dead, Jesus opens their minds to understand the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms in light of all that experience. Those who are Jesus' witnesses will need to put together their experience of his life with scripture's testimony to him. The risen Lord points them toward connections between the two.

After he points them backward in time to the testimony of Israel's scriptures and to recalling their experiences of his ministry, Jesus directs the disciples forward. Repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. That is where the risen Lord's Spirit will lead these disciples next. Both Luke 24 and Acts 1 include Jesus' promise of the Spirit and his call to bear witness to God's work in the world.

In the context of this promise and call, the ascension is not a picture of a risen Christ who leaves the disciples and goes into retirement (as if the Son sinks down into a throne at the right hand of the Father and says: "Whew, am I glad that job is done!"). Instead, the ascension gives us a picture of Jesus as an advance worker for his own followers. Maybe the ascension is not the wrap-up of Jesus' ministry, but his way to get a head start on all that is left to do. Through the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit will be consistently out in front of the apostles and those who hear them, directing Philip to a eunuch's chariot, Peter to the table of Cornelius, Paul to Macedonia and Lydia to Paul's preaching. Jesus leaves the disciples not in order to retire, but to go ahead of them on behalf of that message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins that will be preached to all nations.

In this understanding of the ascension the important direction is not up but out. It is true that Jesus goes up into heaven in both Luke 24 and Acts 1, yet the focus of action is not along the vertical axis as much as along the horizontal one. The risen Jesus may be going up into heaven, but before his feet leave the ground, he speaks to his followers of the future. He points them forward in time, and forward also from Jerusalem to Judea to the ends of the earth. When they get to these future times and

places, they will find in every case that his Spirit has preceded them.

In the meantime, the disciples do not react to the ascension of Jesus as if it were a loss; instead, they experience joy. At the birth of Jesus, the angel had said to the shepherds, "I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people," and after the shepherds met the holy family, they returned to their work "glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen." After Jesus departs from the disciples, they return to Jerusalem "with great joy" and are "continually in the temple blessing God." Here ends the gospel? No, the good news has not ended but is still inspiring joy and praise.