The End and the Beginning
Luke 24: 33-53

When we started out we called this series 'Meet Jesus', because that was always Luke's intention in writing this gospel: that when we read it we might encounter Jesus for ourselves, and know the truth about Him.

And I don't know about you, but I have loved walking through this gospel, as we've met the Jesus who heals the sick and cleanses the lepers and stills the storms, and cast out demons. We've met the Jesus who teaches in such a way that both wounds and heals at the same time. The Jesus who set His face to go to Jerusalem knowing what would befall Him there; the Jesus who rebukes the religious but welcomes sinners and rebels and invites us all to come and lay down our arms and enter His kingdom. The Jesus who is the King of every man, who died that we might live.

And last week, with those two disciples on the road to Emmaus, we stood and watched as they encountered the Lord Jesus, risen from the dead. And despite the fact they'd only just got home, when they realized who the stranger with them was they pegged the 7 miles all the way back to Jerusalem, burst through the door ready to break the incredible news to the gathered disciples that they'd seen Jesus. But before they can get their words out, they're out of breath after all, everyone says, v34, "The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!"

And suddenly no-one seems to know what to think. These men had seen Jesus die, but now some of the women, and the two disciples on the road, and Simon Peter are meeting this same Jesus, who is now very much alive. And the men who just a few hours before were refusing to believe the women and their idle tale, their nonsense about angels and grave clothes and an empty tomb are disorientated and confused. And as you read this last chapter you're left thinking, what's going to happen next?

Well, Jesus appears to them all is what happens next. And His post-resurrection appearances are of such a caliber that these same eleven disciples, who were as cynical and skeptical as anyone else, who refused to believe become so totally convinced that Jesus has been raised from the dead, that they turn the world upside down with the news. So this morning we're going to look at the Great Reversal and the Great Advance.

The Great Reversal:
Verse 36: 'As they were talking about these things [that's Jesus appearing to the disciples on the road and to Simon Peter], Jesus himself stood among them, and said to them, "Peace to you!" Now just put yourself in their shoes. You're one of the eleven disciples gathered in that room. And it's Sunday, and just a few days ago, on Thursday night, you fled when the arrest party came and took Jesus away. You had all these ideas in your head about how Jesus was going to take on the Romans and how you would be at his side when he did, but when things began to turn nasty, far from you being a hero - you ran. And then as you struggled with the guilt and the shame of that you watched the next day – Friday - as Jesus was crucified on a Roman cross. The man you thought was the Messiah you watch, from a safe distance, dying the death of one cursed by God. And as Joseph takes his body from the cross and buries it in a tomb, you go home shattered. Never did you imagine things could have gone this way. This was

nowhere near how you thought things would turn out – and your grief and desolation is mingled with deep regret and remorse and shame at your own personal failure.

But then, only this morning – Sunday - the women come bursting into the room where you and your friends are holed up, and they tell you the tomb is empty and Jesus' body is missing and they gabble on about angels in white clothes. And with the rest you dismiss it all as idle nonsense. But you watch out of the corner of your eye as Peter slips out the room. And a few hours later he comes back – and there's something different about him. He, of all of you, knew he had screwed up badly, but he's back and he's different and he's saying he's seen Jesus alive. And then Cleopas and his friend burst in the room and they start telling you they've seen Jesus and you are confused and bewildered and disorientated and you don't know what to think or who to believe. The one thing you know is that you abandoned Jesus and you saw Him die.

And then, suddenly, whilst they're all talking, Jesus himself appears. And His first words are: 'Peace to you!' Now, do you see the depth of those words? These men who had abandoned him and fled; who were churned up on the inside with guilt and self-blame; who had watched all their hopes and dreams die with Jesus; who had disbelieved and dismissed the women and their story. And Jesus' first words to them are 'Peace to you!' What a measure of the grace of God for people like us who don't deserve it. He doesn't give them a tongue-lashing, he doesn't heap on further guilt. Instead he extends grace and peace to them.

But, perhaps unsurprisingly, their first response is not peaceful thoughts of flower-filled gardens and bubbling streams! Verse 37, 'but they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit.' Why? Because they knew they had seen Him die and yet here He is in the room, and they've only got one category they can put that in - this must be some kind of ghostly apparition. But what Jesus does next is fascinating. Firstly, he confronts their fears – v38, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts." He brings their doubts and fears out into the open and then, secondly, He confronts those same thoughts with the truth.

Now before we look at how He does that, think about your own fears and doubts: maybe for your present situation, or for the future, for your family, or for your job. And they can nag away at us, in the dark, and at times they can be overwhelming and all consuming. And Jesus asks these disciples, why are you worried, why are you troubled, why do you doubt? And those are good questions, not just for them, but for us as well. Why are these thoughts preoccupying you? You see, if Jesus has conquered the grave, and defeated the greatest enemy; and if all the power is His, and He is for you and with you, and if this life is just a drop in the ocean of the eternity that you will enjoy with Him, and if He has everything under control, and knows what He is doing even in the storms of life, then 'why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?'

And Jesus confronts their fears with rock solid, flesh and bone evidence that it is Him, raised from the dead. And He tells them 'use your senses', v39: 'See my

hands and my feet, that it is I myself.' Look at where the nails pierced me – it's me, the one you saw nailed to the cross, the one you saw die. 'Touch me.' I'm alive, I'm real. So this is not some blind faith He is asking them to exercise, He goes out of His way to prove to them, to get them to handle the evidence. He is not some disembodied spirit wandering like a grey shadow through the underworld. He is a real, physical, flesh and blood man. And He is alive and He is even able to eat fish.

And yet, He is also different. The disciples know it's Jesus, and yet at first the two on the road to Emmaus didn't recognize Him. He is real and physical and proves it, but He seems to appear and disappear at will. So, this is not like the previous raisings from the dead we've seen in the gospels. This is not like Lazarus, or the widow of Nain's son, or Jairus' daughter. Because Jesus brought them back to life, but there's no suggestion that afterwards there was anything special about them, and they must have grown old and died just like anyone else. But Jesus is different. As Paul puts it in 1 Cor 15, it's the difference between the seed that gets sown and the plant that grows out of it. What was sown, Jesus' pre-death body, was perishable, just like ours, but He has been raised imperishable, into a new kind of body, into a different league of creation. It's as if He's passed through death and come out the other side. The other raisings from the dead were like people entering death by one door, and Jesus takes them out again by that same door, back into their same pre-death body and life. But they still have to die and re-enter through that same door a second time at some stage down the line. But Jesus entered death and passed though death and came out through the door on the other side, into the New Creation, and death no longer has any hold on Him. And you've got to see a certain irony in this for us – because we take so much care of this life, of this body, we worry and fret and have these fears, and we diet and exercise and go to the gym, but this is just the seed husk of the new creation, resurrection body of which Jesus is the first fruits.

So as the disciples are standing there, gob-smacked, Jesus is driving it home to them – it may run counter to everything you know about life and death, you may be standing there thinking 'it can't be', but He has been raised from the dead and it is absolutely, physically, touch-it-and-see real.

It is *the* Great Reversal: the reversal of death to life, of despair to hope, of darkness to light, of fear to joy. And it is this physical turn around, and only this physical turn around, that can explain how these men turn around. And they undergo some turn-around! Because, they were holed away, nursing their grief and licking their wounds and yet a few days later Luke can write, v52, they 'returned to Jerusalem with great joy.' And that was after Jesus left them for good! How do you explain that joy? And how do you explain the joy in the face of persecution and losing everything that marked the early church? And not only that, but these men were strict, monotheistic Jews: there is only one God and you worship anyone or anything else on pain of death, and yet Luke ends this gospel telling us, v52 again, 'And they worshipped him.' Now, how can you explain Jews worshipping a man as God, unless they saw and experienced and handled and touched something so incredible that it totally upended them?

You see, in the end it is the Great Reversal, the resurrection, that explains the change in these men's lives and the message they take out into the world. And as Luke draws this gospel to a close, he lets us know that this is all just the beginning. Great reversal…

Great Advance
Having shown them He was very much alive, Jesus sets them up for the mission ahead. And He tells them five things…

1. It's all about Him/Jesus
v44: 'Then he said to them, "these are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled."'

Just as He did with the two on the road to Emmaus, Jesus can go through the Bible – not just a few proof texts – but the whole flow of this book and say 'it's all about me and it's all been fulfilled.' He is the seed of the woman who would crush the serpent under his foot; The second Adam who would resist, not give in to, the temptations of satan; He is the offspring of Abraham through whom all nations will be blessed; He is the prophet greater than Moses who perfectly kept the Law; He is the fulfillment of every sacrifice made to atone for sin; the One in whom even the book of Leviticus makes sense; He is the true and faithful High Priest who does not need to sacrifice for His own sins; He is the true king of Israel; the ultimate son of David whom David calls Lord; the one greater than Solomon; the one of whom the psalms sing; He is the suffering servant of Isaiah; the Son of Man whom Daniel sees approaching the Ancient of Days and given the authority and power and dominion and worship of every nation.

And Luke tells us, v45, that Jesus 'Opened their minds to understand the scriptures.' You see, it's possible to come to this book and think it's about you: 'I want to find myself at the centre of the story, I need a verse for me, I want to learn how I can be like David and slay my Goliaths,' and Jesus takes the blinkers off their eyes and shows them that it's all about Him, and what they just couldn't see before the cross, now becomes crystal clear.

Now think about it, if they needed their eyes opening, how much more do we? If they couldn't see it without Jesus' help, don't you think you need it to? So let me encourage you – as you sit down and read this book, and do sit down and read it, sustematically, do so praying, 'God, I want your Holy Spirit to be my teacher, I want you to open my mind to your word, I want to see Jesus and how all of this is all about Him. I want to find Him at the centre of it all.'

The second thing Jesus tells them is that…

2. There's a message to proclaim
V46-7: he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name."

Because Jesus has died and been raised from the dead, because He's paid the price for every one of our sins, these disciples and you and I have a message to share: repent, turn around, have your thinking, your world-view transformed; put your trust in Jesus and you can know the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with your Heavenly Father and your life (and not you're your thinking) transformed by the turn-around power of the resurrection.

Now, just think about it: to keep that news to ourselves would be like a boy given a bag of sweets, of candy, who hides away in a corner rather than share it with his friends. It would be like a beggar who finds a banquet spread with food and who gorges himself rather than go and invite his friends to join the feast!

No, this great reversal is so great, Jesus says, the whole world should be told…

3. Every nation needs to hear it
v47, "Repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem." It was always the global purpose of God, Jesus says, that every nation would be blessed through the Messiah. This was never to be some kind of small, parochial, for Jewish-eyes only thing, the invitation to join the King's feast is to go out into the streets and the byways of the nations that as many as want to, can come.

You see, God has always been a God of mission, and through our praying and our giving and our going, we get to partner in this mission so that the whole world might glorify God in Jesus. And let's face it, one of the joys of a church like ours, is that we get to see just a glimpse, just a foretaste of what God is doing around the globe as He gathers that great crowd that is going to stand before the throne, as Revelation says: 'from every tribe and language and people and nation' (Rev 5:9).

And fourthly Jesus tells, them it's a message that is going to come with the stamp of their authority.

4. Apostolic authority, personal witness
v48: "You are witnesses of these things." You've listened to me teach; you've seen the miracles; you've heard me call people to repentance; you've watched me welcome sinners; you saw me die and now you know I'm alive. You're witnesses of these things.

And in terms of their authority, they were the first and they are the last. And we can't add to or take away from their testimony as they wrote it down in this book. This is it. But whilst we can never share their authority as first hand witnesses, we can pass on the teaching they passed on, and bear witness to what we have seen and heard and experienced of Christ and His resurrection power in our own lives.

But the 5th and final thing Jesus says to them here is you just can't do all this in your own power, you need

5. Holy Spirit Empowerment

v49, “And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.”

And the promise of the Father is the Holy Spirit, who came at the day of Pentecost. So whilst this gospel ends with Jesus leaving, it also ends with the promise of the Spirit’s coming. And Jesus is saying to them, don’t leave home without it. Don’t think you can try anything until you have His power upon you, until you’re wearing His power like you wear your cloak.

I read recently about a professor at a theological seminary who was responsible for teaching the students how to preach. And every year he would take the class out to the local cemetery. And he would tell them to preach to the dead bodies in their graves and tell them to get up and come back to life. And every year there would be these nervous giggles and shifting of feet, until one or two would do it as a bit of a joke, everyone knowing full well nothing would happen. And when the laughter had died away the professor would gather the students around and say, ‘and you have no more power to make dead hearts live, or those trapped in sin to be freed, or the unbelieving to believe, than you do to raise these dead bones. Only God has that life-transforming power and you need that power more than you need anything else.’

You see church, unless we have the power of the Holy Spirit at work in our lives, individually and as a body; unless we believe that God is the God of the great reversal, and can bring life from death and transform lives; unless we are daily seeking the infilling power of the Spirit and living out of His divine resources, and His powerful enabling, then we are kidding ourselves that we will achieve anything for Jesus. As the Psalmist says, ‘unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labour in vain.’

So this book is all about Jesus, and these guys were witnesses to it and they are our authority and like them we get to join in spreading the message to every nation. And God our heavenly Father promises us every resource we need in His Spirit to get that message out.

And so this Gospel ends were it began. You see, back in chapter one we met Zechariah, soon to become the father of John the Baptist, in the temple, longing for God’s deliverance to come to Israel. And as Jesus leaves the disciples and ascends back to heaven, Luke tells us, v52-3, the disciples ‘returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God.’ They had seen and witnessed with their own eyes the deliverance and redemption Zechariah had longed for.

And Luke just leaves the ending hanging there. And we’re left wondering, how will the disciples live this out? What’s this Spirit empowered mission going to look like? Well, you can read about that in Acts, Luke’s second volume, and when you do, and you get to the end, you’ll see Luke leaves the ending of Acts hanging as well. Because this work of proclaiming the message of repentance and forgiveness in Jesus, in the power of the Spirit, continues right up to today, and we get to be a part of it.

So Luke has done his job. He's presented Jesus to us, he has helped us meet Him. He has given us a taste of the mission ahead. Now, as one commentator says (Bock), it is time for everyone to decide where they stand. Are you going to follow this Jesus, or do something else with your life?