

John 5 & Luke 24      No Questions? Well, just one.

The first scripture I read this morning comes from Luke's gospel. It is that gospel's description of how Christ's post-resurrection time with the disciples ended. Luke's description of this extraordinary event is very brief—only one verse: "While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven." The passage began with those disciples whom Jesus had joined on the road to Emmaus rushing back to Jerusalem to tell the eleven about their encounter with Jesus. How he had walked with them and opened the Scriptures to them without them recognizing him. As they conclude relating their experience Jesus appears among them and again explains how he has fulfilled what the Scriptures had told them. Christ tells them they have witnessed the fulfillment of all their scriptures which told of a Messiah who would suffer and die, not one who would restore Israel's nation-state status. A Messiah who would conquer that death. A Messiah who had come to bring about repentance and offer forgiveness of sins. They are commissioned to tell what they have witness and to proclaim what they now understood about God's love, mercy and grace toward humanity. Just as in what is termed Jesus' farewell address in John's gospel which occurs before the crucifixion, Christ is here preparing the disciples for the time he will no longer be present with them in the way they have known. Verse 49 in this passage tells them they are to remain in Jerusalem until they receive the help they have been promised: the sending of the Holy Spirit which will provide them with the power that will clothe them and enable them to be witnesses to the good news that Christ has brought to them. They are to begin there and then go out from there, always as witnesses. The disciples' response to Christ's blessing and withdrawal is to return to Jerusalem with great joy; to worship him and to be continually in the temple blessing God. There are many today who when they read descriptions of the Ascension envision this as an excuse for what they see as Jesus' absence from this world. They take the position because he ascended, Jesus is gone. This truly seems to apply to Jesus' physical body which continued after the resurrection because those witness accounts tell us that the risen Lord continued to eat and drink, that the wounds in his hands and side remained and that he could be touched. It is this physical body which ascends into heaven leaving the disciples behind—but also leaving them with a mission and a promise. It is the close association of the promise that they will be clothed with power on high to the physical ascension that lets us know Jesus was not through with the disciples yet. There were many more things for them to do and much more for them to learn about God's intentions for the world. There is so much more to come—and Luke writes an entire sequel which tells of that very active presence which comes into the world and uses the disciples. The ascension of Jesus described here has **less** to do with the geography of **where** Jesus is and **more** to do with the identity of **who Jesus is**. It firmly establishes him as the

Lord and Messiah, exalted eternally at God's right hand in heaven and reigning there in ways unrelated to his physical body. Later when we come to the Table Jesus has prepared for us; we need to remember this promise given to us, that although the physical body of Jesus is no longer here, Jesus is still very much present in this place and in the world and working through the empowering of the Holy Spirit to bring about God's purpose for the world. The response of the disciples to the Ascension is not grief at separation, but worship and obedience. They went back to Jerusalem with joy and were continually in the temple blessing God. It is helpful to understand that the term translated from the Greek as blessing here actually refers to the required response of praise and thanksgiving given to God for blessings received. It seems that the disciples are now well on the way to being able to answer the call given to them when they first began to follow Jesus about the countryside. I am auditing a course at Union on the book of Genesis. Studying the text as a whole unit is intensely rewarding, but what is most important about the process is to keep in mind that the Scripture we have received is a living Word to us. As Dr. Sadler keeps asking, to what issues of this day and time does this event in the text speak. This is always the challenge for us—to discern what move the Holy Spirit is making here and now. This is a challenge that has been going on throughout the revelations of God to God's people. As we recently read from the book of Acts, Peter was challenged by the Holy Spirit to re-examine things he had been taught and lived by his whole life. He was sent into the home of a Gentile for the purpose of bringing Christ's message to those outside the "chosen". The "chosen" of God suddenly seemed to include more than he thought. It is hearing the Word with openness which in a roundabout way brings me to the second text read this morning. This particular passage is found early in John's gospel. This is a healing story, one of many found throughout the gospels about Jesus healing people. These stories make it clear that Jesus could not walk past or ignore human suffering; he had to do something about it. The image portrayed is a narrative portrait of a God of consummate compassion. Here is Jesus in Jerusalem near the temple. He walks by a natural pool named Beth-zanthe which was known for its healing powers. It seems that the pool would bubble now and then. The belief was that when that occurred then the first one to step into the waters would be healed. Such a belief about the possibility of a cure would naturally lead many to gather there in hope. This passage confirms that indeed many invalids—lame, blind, and paralyzed—all lay in the five porticoes which surrounded the pool. As he is passing Jesus notices one man in this crowd who has been there a long time—38 years to be exact. We know what is coming—this man's wait is over. Jesus will heal him. But this story is a little bit different from others where Jesus heals those who come to him or who are brought to him. The sick man does not approach Jesus nor does anyone come to Jesus on his behalf to ask for healing. Instead, we see that Jesus, having noticed the man comes to him and asks, "Do you want to be made well?" You might suppose

the man would give a simple straightforward yes as an answer. After all, waiting near a pool reputed to have healing powers for 38 years would seem to indicate that is his desire. But what the man says is totally different. He doesn't answer the question. He launches into a series of complaints about his situation. He has no one to help him. When the pool is active and he is trying to get there others always get in front of him. Jesus has asked one question: "Do you want to be healed?" He has not asked for a history of the man's plight. Despite not getting a direct answer, Jesus asks no more questions, he just heals the man. He doesn't put him in the pool, he just heals him: "Stand up, take your mat and walk." The man is immediately made well. The man has not approached Jesus in faith asking for healing. After the healing, the man makes no declaration of faith or even an offering of praise and thanks. There is no recognition by the man or expression of understanding of who Jesus is. Jesus hasn't asked the man, "What do you think of me?" or "What do you believe?" There are no conditions attached to this act of compassion by Jesus. What is the message for us in this narrative about Christ's healing actions? Even though the new commandment that Jesus gave the disciples appears much later in the gospel narrative, it seems that this is the core of that commandment. "Love one another, just as I have loved you." Love is at the core of Jesus' actions. Love that doesn't ask a lot of questions. Love that is offered freely, without conditions. Love given despite a lack of appreciation or thanks. Jesus healed the man at the pool after asking only one question, which wasn't even answered. "Do you want to be healed?" He saw the man's condition and knew what was needed. Since that new commandment to love as Jesus love also said that we would be known by the way we love, how do we live into this type of love in our world today? What is the one question we need to ask of ourselves as we look around? And what is the answer that we then must receive? Where do we find those waiting for healing from their life's debilitating conditions and what do we do when we find them? What message do we find in God's living word? In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.