

**First Christian Church (Lawrence, KS)**  
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**April 16, 2023**

*The Shape of Our Worship*  
**“Blessed and Sent out on Mission”**

Luke 24:36-53 (NIV)

*36 While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.”*

*37 They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. 38 He said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? 39 Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.”*

*40 When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. 41 And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, “Do you have anything here to eat?” 42 They gave him a piece of broiled fish, 43 and he took it and ate it in their presence.*

*44 He said to them, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.”*

*45 Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. 46 He told them, “This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, 47 and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. 48 You are witnesses of these things. 49 I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”*

*50 When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. 51 While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. 52 Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. 53 And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.*

Acts 1:1-12 (NIV)

*1 In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach 2 until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. 3 After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. 4 On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command:*

*“Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. 5 For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”*

*6 Then they gathered around him and asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”*

*7 He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”*

*9 After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.*

*10 They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. 11 “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”*

*12 Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day’s walk from the city.*

**[Slide 1]**    *Opening*

Good morning, church! Today isn’t Easter Sunday, but it’s good to remember that every Sunday is a celebration of the resurrection. Every Sunday is another chance to remind ourselves that our faith and the church and our daily lives as followers of Christ are all a consequence of, and dependent upon, the reality of the resurrection of Jesus from the grave.

**[Slide 2]**    *Review*

So, even though the messages of the past two Sundays haven’t directly addressed a particular piece of our worship service, what we learned from the biblical accounts of the events of Palm Sunday and Easter certainly fit within the scope of this series, “The Shape of Our Worship.” Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem and his assertion of his authority over the Temple picture for us his role as the king of God’s kingdom who comes to his house to heal and instruct us as he makes his presence known among us and establishes his kingdom in our midst as we worship. And his resurrection from the grave is both the primary reason we worship on Sundays, and the foundational truth that upholds Christian faith and our lives as his people.

**[Slide 3]**    *Introduction*

Today's message takes us to the final part of the worship service, the section that has the heading in your bulletin, "*Blessing and Sending: We go as God's sent ones with his blessing to do His will.*" If you're wondering what happened to the section on "Sharing Communion," you're not dealing with another senior moment. We haven't examined that part yet, so, you didn't miss that message. Next week, I'll be teaching on water baptism and the following week on communion; then we'll wrap this series up on the first Sunday in May.

But the closing portion of our worship service fits very neatly in this post-Easter season. Understanding the significance of Jesus' engagement with his disciples and his teaching during the time he was with them following the resurrection is key for us to grasp the significance of that part of our worship. The title of this message is not very cute, but it is straight to the point: the closing portion of our worship is all about being "Blessed and Sent out on Mission."

So, let's turn to the two texts we just heard read: Luke 24:36-53 and Acts 1:1-12. You'll need two fingers or a bookmark to keep your place, because we'll be going back and forth between the two passages a little bit.

[Slide 4] *Luke 24/Acts 1: Literary background*

Let's start with a little literary background to help us understand what's going on with these two passages. First, the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts were both written by the same author, Paul's companion and fellow-minister, Luke, the "beloved physician." We can see that in the opening verse of Acts 1, where Luke references his "former book," when addressing his patron, Theophilus, who has paid for the production of these two volumes.

Second, Luke's gospel and the book of Acts were conceived as a single connected work in two volumes. The two books were never intended to be read separately, but sequentially, as two parts of a single, continuous narrative. So, for instance, we see in the opening passage of Acts quite a few unexplained details which the author expects the reader will already know from being familiar with Luke's gospel. Jesus and his apostles are introduced casually as if the reader is already well-acquainted with them, as is John the Baptist. We have references to events mentioned in the gospel: Jesus' appearances to his disciples after being raised; his commissioning of them for a world-wide ministry; his command to wait in Jerusalem; John's ministry of baptism. Luke also mentions some key themes that carry over from the gospel—the kingdom of God, the Holy Spirit's activity, the teaching ministry of Jesus, and the evidence for the resurrection.

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Recognizing that Luke-Acts is a single work in two volumes helps us to better understand what is going on in Luke 24 and Acts 1. At first glance, the two passages seem a bit confusing. Why does Luke repeat part of Luke 24 in Acts 1, but not exactly?

You see, these two books would have been written on a scroll. In fact, each of them is about the maximum length that you could put on a single scroll. How, then, could the author alert the reader that this scroll was continuing the story that had started on a different scroll? The answer: he would dovetail the beginning of the second volume with the end of the first volume by overlapping the accounts. It was a device that was commonly employed by historians of the first century, such as in Josephus' histories, which were also multi-scrolled works.

So, Luke writes two similar accounts of the events he describes in these parallel passages. He includes the main events in both accounts. But the first account (Luke) is abbreviated, and brings the first volume to a conclusion, while the second account (Acts) is extended, with fuller details, in order to open up the narrative for the second volume.

[Slide 6] *The pattern of Jesus' passion and resurrection*

Let's look now at the main events or developments in these two passages. There's a pattern here that is pertinent for our lives and for the church, including our worship service.

Let's think about how these events fit in with what we heard from the last two weeks—the sequence of Jesus' passion and resurrection. Luke takes us from Jesus' death on the cross to his burial to his resurrection to his appearances to the disciples to his ascension. That sequence is replicated in the life of everyone who becomes a follower of Jesus Christ—and you can't sidestep it. I come to the cross—where I die to my old life in order to identify with Jesus as his disciple. I acknowledge his death as the necessary payment for my justification and I relinquish my lordship over my own life. Then comes burial—water baptism (more about that next week)—I leave behind what I was; I part with my old ways and my old identity in order to take up a new identity as a Christian. Resurrection brings me new life as the Spirit of God makes me alive with Christ. Then he comes to me, teaching me and changing me so that I become more like him. Then comes ascension—when I join him before the throne in heaven.

That's not just a bit of nice poetic imagery. That is, in fact, what the Christian life looks like. Let's look a little closer now at these specific points that Luke emphasizes in the life of the embryonic church following the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

[Slide 7] *Points of emphasis in Luke 24/Acts 1*

(1) The first thing that Luke emphasizes in these two passages is that Jesus gave the disciples evidence that was sufficient to prove to them that he was alive. In Luke 24, we have multiple appearances of Jesus, including the main one to the Eleven and those with them, where he spoke with them, he showed them his wounds and they touched him, he ate food and spent a good amount of time with them. The account in Acts adds that he continued to appear to the disciples from time to time over the course of about seven weeks. During those appearances he gave them ample evidence to prove that he was alive. He gave them “*many convincing proofs*”—what they needed to solidify their faith and explain why the Messiah needed to be crucified and then raised from the dead.

You and I don’t have the same opportunity to examine Jesus’ resurrected body. But we do have the same opportunity to believe the evidence that they reported to us. One of the things that the early church repeatedly insisted was that the apostles were eyewitnesses to the resurrection; that they were persuaded after initially not believing, because they saw Jesus after he was raised, on multiple occasions, with multiple witnesses. And the evidence bears that out.

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(2) Then Jesus explained the Scriptures concerning himself to them, so that they could see how God’s word predicted his suffering and his resurrection. He showed them how the teaching he had previously given them while they were with him fit with what was said in the Scriptures. That teaching gave them the understanding they would need to navigate this new relationship to God and to one another, to the synagogue and to the wider world.

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(3) The next point Luke emphasizes is Jesus’ announcement of their mission, this new assignment that would extend far beyond their expectations and their previous experience. Before, they had accompanied Jesus around familiar territory, albeit with a whole new way of thinking. Now, they would be going to an unfamiliar world, not just to Jews, but to the Gentiles, to everyone, with the news that Jesus was the Messiah of Israel and the rightful king of all humanity.

What comes along with this assignment is a new identity: they are witnesses of the resurrection. We’ve already seen the importance of this fact, that the Twelve apostles, plus many others among the first generation of disciples, were able to testify to the truth of the resurrection on the basis of their own eyewitness experience of seeing Jesus after he was raised. There are two other things that are important about this new identity:

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(1) They are called to give testimony about what they know and have seen. The disciples did not need to be anything else. Their educational achievements, their spiritual development, their abilities or lack of abilities were not unimportant, but they were not the primary issue. The church would not be built upon the disciples' personal strengths and it would not fall because of their personal weaknesses. It is built upon the truthful testimony to Jesus and his resurrection.

That ought to encourage us—not only because we have been given a deposit of truthful testimony on which to base our faith, but because we aren't at a loss even though we didn't see the wounds in Jesus' resurrected body for ourselves. We can't be witnesses of Jesus' resurrection in the same way that the apostles were able to be. But we can still be faithful witnesses to tell what they passed on to us. Plus, our truthful testimonies about what God has done in and for us are a part of our message that we share with the world. We can be living evidence of the resurrection as the Spirit of God lives out the life of Jesus in and through us.

(2) The disciples were not required to become spiritual philosophers or religious gurus. Christian faith is not the result of philosophical speculation; it is not a religion that has been constructed based on the musings of old men. Christian faith is the result of an historical event—even though that event transcended space and time, it still occurred within space and time. Our faith is based on a person and history—the life and teachings of a real person who was the incarnation of the Godhead; who died and was raised from death by the power of God; and whose story has been told to us by those who actually knew him.

Again, that should encourage us. Some of you might be more inclined to philosophy and theological musing on various topics. Those are not unimportant, not at all. But they are not foundational; nor are they necessary for all of us. What is necessary is our faith in what has been transmitted to us by the witnesses, and our own participation in the continued transmission of the testimony of what the risen Jesus has done for us.

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(4) The next thing Luke highlights in these two passages deserves its own sermon series—for it is something that Jesus is quite emphatic about. Luke makes it the main focal point after demonstrating the reality of the resurrection.

After charging the disciples with a mission that extends to the ends of the earth, Jesus commands them to wait; they are not to go out on that mission, but to wait in Jerusalem for what he describes as “*what the Father promised.*” This is a huge deal in both Luke 24 and in Acts 1; there's a reason Luke puts it in the

spotlight of his narrative. For today, let me simply point out that Jesus commands the apostles to preach the good news to the entire world, but not until they receive the power of the Holy Spirit to do so. Jesus knows perfectly well that it will be possible to attempt to complete this assignment from God without God's enablement. But that would lead to failure, and he wants his church to succeed. So he tells them all, *"Don't go anywhere until you receive the power of the Holy Spirit."* For it will only be through God's enablement that they can fulfill God's mission. The job, to be blunt, cannot be done without God's power; it is too big and too difficult on their own. *But God has promised that he would give them the power they will need—so they are to wait in expectancy for him to do what he promised, and then proceed to do what he has called them to do.*

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(5) Then follows something that would be easy to ignore, but it's actually crucial. Right before Jesus returns to the Father, in front of their eyes, he blesses them. That is, he prays a prayer of blessing upon them: it is both a prayer asking the Father to bestow some spiritual power upon them, and a prophetic pronouncement of what God will do in response to this prayer. Jesus is reassuring his disciples that what God has promised—this power that they are to receive from the coming of the Holy Spirit—God will give. His prayer of blessing declares the promise and prays for its fulfillment in them, so that they now have a basis for believing that is more than merely wishful thinking. They have a word from God which they can hold firmly and believe for its fulfillment in their future.

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This prophetic blessing is the Son's prayer for his church: for God's enabling power to be theirs; for a new spiritual capacity, for supernaturally endowed abilities to carry out the mission of God. With the coming of the Spirit will come new gifts that will enable them to do the task, to complete the assignment. The blessing is the sign that God will do what he has promised, for the prayer is made in accordance with the will of God—it asks for God to do what he has said he will do, and it invites the one blessed to exercise his or her faith in order to see it come to pass.

The blessing also serves another function. It is Jesus' final action before he departs from them. The blessing closes the time of preparation, instruction, and direction. What will follow is the extension of the mission as the disciples are sent out into the world with a new word—the gospel—and a new power—to continue to do what Jesus began to do and teach as his ministers: healing the sick, driving out

demonic forces, making disciples, teaching them all that Jesus had said, and building the new community of the church, the new people of God.

[Slide 14] *The shape of our worship: gathering, growing, going*

What does all of this have to do with the shape of our worship service?

A lot, actually. There is a basic flow in our worship service that is tied directly to the flow in the life of the church. We have a statement about who we are as a church; you can read it on the inside of your bulletin. It describes this movement, this flow: we gather for worship, we grow spiritually, we go into the world to minister. Our worship service basically follows that same pattern.

We gather to worship, to experience God's presence and to hear from him. Praise, prayers, instruction, mutual encouragement—these are the elements that focus on our gathering. We grow spiritually as we ingest the word of God; as we receive from the Holy Spirit, who works within us when we hear the word and think about it; as we apply what we have learned to our hearts and our lives. All of this has been the focus of the sermon series to date and aligns with the first parts of the service.

The last part—the going into the world—that's the part of the service we're looking at today. Worship isn't just about gathering and learning. It isn't complete without the going. In fact, much of the learning and spiritual growth that we experience comes after we leave here on Sundays—as we put into practice throughout the week the truths that God has been teaching us in our worship.

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Spiritual growth, like all healthy growth, requires more than consuming; it requires exercise. You need exercise to develop muscles and abilities. Consumption without exercise leads to obesity and disability. That's true in every realm—physical health, in relationships, finances, intellectual pursuits, and in spirituality. You have to do more than just take stuff in; you have to put forth effort, practice what you have learned, until it becomes a regular part of your life. Going, doing, exercising our faith develops our spiritual strength. We don't just hear about the resurrection; we go out to minister to the world in the power of a changed life, because the reality of Jesus' resurrection has given us new spiritual strength.

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Likewise, the truth of the resurrection is more than a philosophical basis for a religious system or a doctrine to be defended against the attacks of skeptics. The resurrection is the basis for our faith *and* for our life as followers of Christ. We go out on mission—on *his mission*—as a result of his resurrection, to tell others *about*



his resurrection, to demonstrate to them the new spiritual life we have *because* of his resurrection, and to minister to others in the power of the Spirit of God that is available to us *through* the resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

**[Slide 17]** *Ministry in the mission of Christ*

Ministry, is, in fact, one of the key goals of every worship service—ministry in the mission of Christ by everyone who is a part of the body of Christ. We come to worship, not to be entertained, but to be equipped so that we are able to minister to the world, that little piece of the world that we touch every week. So, we go out to share the love of God that we have received with others, so that they can know the same love. We go out to tell the truth about God that we have learned with others, so that they can know the truth that can set them free from the lies that dominate their lives. We go out to show the character of God to others, so that they can see what goodness actually is, and understand what it means that God is good. We go out to bring the power of God to others, so that they can find freedom from the habits and addictions and fears that hold them prisoner. That is our mission; that is your mission, if you are a follower of Christ.

Don't say, "*But pastor, I'm just . . . I'm not . . . I can't . . .*" Listen! Ministry is not some unattainable level of spiritual stature that is reserved for the special few. Ministry is the natural way of life for anyone who has come to Christ, who has surrendered his or her life to him, who has stopped living for his or her own fulfillment, his or her own desires, and started living for God instead.

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Jesus told the apostles to wait for the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. What was that empowerment supposed to do? It has one primary purpose that gets accomplished through several subsidiary means. That purpose is to equip a person for ministry in the mission of Jesus to reach the world with the gospel; to be a witness of the resurrection, someone who will go out to the world wherever you are or wherever God sends you and show and tell people you meet that Jesus is alive and what that means.

How does the Holy Spirit do that? Well, it's a miracle, but it happens in several ways.

**[Slide 19]** *How the Holy Spirit empowers us and equips us for ministry*

(1) The Holy Spirit enhances your own natural abilities and personality traits so that they become useful skills for sharing the gospel and/or serving the world. These are abilities and traits that are yours simply by being you—they are gifts in you through creation, God's gifting that makes you who you are (apart from any damage through sin—either your own sin that damages you, or the sin of

others that has damaged you). They are capacities you have that you can develop into skills, which God can then both use and enhance for ministry.

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(2) The Spirit not only enhances your natural abilities, he redirects your abilities toward godly ends. He redeems those abilities that you formerly used for selfish purposes, or to manipulate others, or to do some other evil thing. I have a friend who died recently. Before he came to know the Lord, he was pretty messed up with drugs and various things. But he was always naturally generous. His wife told us once that even before he was saved, he was generous. If you were a friend, and you didn't have a TV, he would steal one for you and give it to you. Well, when he met Jesus, that changed—his natural desire to be generous got redirected. He became a very successful businessman who not only gave generously to lots of people and Christian ministries, but spent most of his career helping others learn how to handle finances according to God's ways, so they could be financially free and generous themselves. God redirected his natural abilities toward godly ends.

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(3) The Holy Spirit works in you and with you to rebuild your character, so that your life reflects the ways of the kingdom of God, so that God's character and nature are seen in you. He brings healing from wounds of all kinds, breaks the power of sinful habits, and trains you for righteousness—all of which helps to equip you to minister to others who have similar problems, who need someone they know and trust to help them learn how they can change.

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(4) The Holy Spirit also changes your motivations and desires from what used to drive you toward self-indulgence and self-centered living. In its place he puts a hunger and thirst for righteousness, so that you find pleasure in doing what is good instead of what is evil. As you learn to walk in the Spirit, crucifying your own sinful desires and taking up the power of the resurrection, you become a model for others, someone who can sympathize with those who are struggling and can find ways to help them walk with Jesus.

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(5) The Spirit will also equip you by giving you brand new abilities and capabilities that you didn't have before. Some of these will be abilities that you develop as you follow Christ, learn his ways, and practice doing the things that the Bible commands us to do. I'm thinking of a couple of other friends right now who developed new capabilities and strengths that they didn't have at first. One is a man who really didn't like to read at all, and would avoid reading whenever he

could. He admitted that he never read the church bulletin and rarely read the Bible. But he started making a habit of reading his Bible and that grew; then he started reading other books, and that grew. Now he enjoys reading, and has grown immensely because of it. Another friend had a similar problem. He had some attention issues, so devotions were always difficult for him. But he decided that he was going to submit to the Lord's discipline, and began keeping a regular devotional habit. And that habit became the joy of his life and a real strength that made him a mature leader and minister for Jesus.

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Some of the Holy Spirit's new gifts, though, are not things you learn or develop through discipline—they are simply new abilities that you didn't have before and now you do. They are supernatural enablements that God gives you for some special purpose or some particular kind of ministry. Oh, these abilities can be developed, matured, honed. But they are basically purely a gift. I know a woman who is a trained singer with a lovely voice. That's a natural gift that she has developed. But she also has a supernatural ability to lead worship, a gift from God for discerning what the Spirit of God is saying to the church at the moment, an ability to lead the congregation toward what he is directing. Her gift carries an anointing from God: when she sings and leads worship, you can sense the presence of God in a way that is breathtaking.

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Ministry is the overflow of who you are; it is the life you have in God that flows out from you. Whatever fills your heart will come out of your mouth—whether that is gossip, complaining, criticism, self-hatred, boasting, coarse joking, mocking, sarcasm; or praise, encouragement, testimony, witness. Whatever fills your heart will show itself in your work or service—either in looking for ways to take care of your self, feed your own desires, protect your own comfort; or in looking for ways to serve others, bless others, lift up Jesus.

So, when we come to the close of our service, there are two key moments that are crucial for completing our time of worship and readying us for spiritual growth. The first is the blessing—the prophetic prayer for God to enable us in some new or greater way, a declaration of what God will give that allows each of us to grasp with faith a promise of God that will help us to live more ably as followers of Christ who are on mission.

And the second is when we turn to go: the blessing announces the close of this time of worship and the opening of the time of ministry, of extending our mission to the world. We go into the world, empowered by God's Spirit for the

task ahead of us this week, of being his witnesses to Jesus and the resurrection. We are his ministers who are impacting some portion of the world with the resurrection power of God in us, so that the world can see Jesus and find life in him. We go, like the disciples, praising him as we do, while we embrace his mission and look for what the Spirit of God will do through us as we go, until he returns.

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*Transition to communion*

*[Worship team, if you would begin making your way to the platform . . . ; those who are helping to serve communion please join me in the front . . .]*