LUKE 24:
TO BE WITNESSES OF THE
FORGIVENESS AND COMPASSION OF
JESUS

Francis J. Moloney, SDB

The Gospels of Mark and Matthew both promise the reconstitution of a disbanded and failed group of disciples "on the other side" of Jesus' death and resurrection. They do this within the context of the Last Supper: "I shall not drink again of the fruit of the vine, until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God" (Mk 14:25; See Mt 26:29). Neither Mark nor Matthew reports a scene after the resurrection when this promise is fulfilled. It was not needed, as the prophecy points to the celebration of the Eucharist as it was practised in both the Markan and the Matthean communities.

The Gospel of Luke maintains this tension that looks to a later moment when Jesus will again celebrate a meal with his disciples. Indeed, Jesus makes such a prediction on two occasions (Lk 22:16 and 18). The Gospel of Luke, however, goes further than either Mark or Matthew by reporting two occasions when the risen Jesus shares a meal with his disciples. The first of these meal scenes is recorded in Luke 24:13-35: the journey to Emmaus, and the second takes place in Jesus' final appearance to all the disciples (vv. 36-48). However, before these meal scenes, Luke respects the tradition, and reports the discovery, by women, of the empty tomb (vv. 1-12).

1 Francis J. Moloney was first a Professor of the New Testament at the Faculty of Theology of Melbourne (Australia) and later at Catholic University, Washington, U.S.A. At present he is the Provincial of the Salesians of Australia.
All the episodes of the resurrection account are linked by an insistence that everything took place on the one day. The account opens with the naming of a given day: “On the first day of the week” (v. 1). The reader is next told, “That very same day two of them were going to a village named Emmaus” (v. 13). Towards the end of their journey Jesus’ fellow-travelers say: “Stay with us for it is towards evening and the day is now far spent” (v. 29). After the breaking of the bread, “They rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem.” They make their report, but “as they were saying this, Jesus himself stood among them” (v. 36). This is the final presence of Jesus to his disciples in the Gospel as, at the end of the day, he leaves them in his ascension into heaven (v. 51). No other “day” has intervened across 24:1-53.

The whole of Luke’s Gospel has been directed towards this “day.” As Jesus began his journey towards Jerusalem in 9:51, the narrator commented, “When the days drew near for him to be received up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” That “journey” comes to its close in Jerusalem through “the things that have happened there” (24:18). On this resurrection “day” we sense that we are at the end of a long journey. An important theme in the Gospel of Luke and its companion work, the Acts of the Apostles, is that of a journey.2 Throughout the Gospel, a journey leads to Jerusalem, where the paschal events take place (see especially 9:51). At the beginning of Acts, the early Church is still in Jerusalem. The Spirit is given there, and it is from there that a second journey begins, reaching out to the ends of the earth. The center-point of Luke-Acts is the city of Jerusalem. The journey of Jesus leads him there. In Jerusalem the Paschal events take place, and he ascends to his Father from that city.


Jerusalem is the end of the journey of Jesus and the journey of the apostles begins there. They are commissioned to go out to all the nations, but they are to “stay in the city” to await the gift of the Spirit (24:49). There they are given the Spirit (Acts 2:1-13), there they first become “church,” one in heart and soul, celebrating the Lord’s presence in their meals (2:42-47). However, it is from Jerusalem that they eventually set out, witnesses “in Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8; see also 20:7-11; 27:33-36). The city of Jerusalem and the events of that “day” act as a fulcrum, around which God’s saving history swivels.3 A theological and pastoral theme that is seldom noticed, however, is that this “day,” marked by the traditional commissioning of the apostles by the risen Lord, also recognizes that disciples who have experienced their own failure are commissioned and sent out, through their encounters with the risen Lord, to be witnesses of the compassion and forgiveness of God that they have experienced. The following reading of Luke 24 attempts to highlight that theme.

1. The Empty Tomb (vv. 1-12)

The essential elements of a resurrection account are found in Luke 24:1-12: the discovery of an empty tomb on the first day of the week, the appearance of heavenly figures who proclaim the Easter message, and the return of the women to report what has happened. Luke, however, has reshaped the telling of the story. The preparation of the spices has already taken place in the interval between the burial of Jesus and “the first day of the week” (23:56a; 24:1). The discovery of the empty tomb (vv. 2-3) only leaves them perplexed (v. 4a). Luke wishes to tell his readers and listeners that resurrection faith is not born at an empty tomb. In their perplexity, they are confronted with two men, dressed in dazzling apparel (v. 4b). The clothing is a traditional indication

that these figures are messengers from heaven, and the response of the women, who bow their faces to the ground, confirms this (v. 5a). They do not wish to face the heavenly figures. The question the men pose to the women continues Luke’s insistence that faith is not born at an empty tomb. They ask why they are seeking Jesus in a cemetery! If they wish to find Jesus, they will not find him among the dead (v. 5b). The men announce the Easter message: “He is not here, but has been raised” (v. 6a).

There is a more profound basis for Easter faith. They may not have found the risen Jesus, but if they are seeking proof for the Easter message uttered by the men in v. 6b, they are to remember Jesus’ word to them. They are to recall the message of Jesus, told them during their time with him in Galilee (see 8:1-3). As with all the prophetic utterances of Jesus, what he, the Son of Man, said would take place has happened. His prophecies are true. He was delivered into the hands of sinful men, and they crucified him. But it is now the third day since he was slain, and the final part of Jesus’ prophecy was: “And on the third day rise” (v. 7. See 9:22). The women must be regarded as coming to Easter faith. The men told them: “Remember” (v. 6), and the women “remembered his words.” In this faith they leave the place of the dead. “Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James and the other women with them” announce that Jesus’ promises have come true to the eleven remaining apostles and everyone else. The apostles and everyone else regard such news as an idle tale (v. 11). Peter is reported to have gone to the tomb, found only the burial clothes and, like the women’s initial response,

---

4 In both Mark (Mk 16:7) and Matthew (Mt 28:7) the women are to instruct the disciples that Jesus is going ahead of them to Galilee. This is impossible for Luke, as there can be no return to Galilee. All the saving events surrounding Jesus’ passion, death, resurrection, and ascension take place in Jerusalem, and the Acts of the Apostles begins in Jerusalem. The Galilee tradition, however, is preserved in the command to the women to recall what Jesus said to them in Galilee.

---

5 The tradition about Peter recorded in v. 12 is not found in a major textual tradition, and is insecure. It is very close to Jn 20:6-7, and may have been imported from there. However, it is consistent with Luke’s general picture of the Apostle Peter, and it helps explain the report of the two disciples in the next episode: “Some of those who were with us went to the tomb, and found it just as the women had said; but him they did not see” (v. 24). I tend to accept v. 12 as authentic. See the more detailed discussion in J. A. Fitzmyer, The Gospel According to Luke X–XXIV (Anchor Bible 28A; Garden City: Doubleday, 1985), 1542, 1547. Fitzmyer supports its inclusion.
This impression is further reinforced once the reader notices the details of the account itself. In their sadness and disappointment the two disciples do not recognize Jesus (v. 15-17). They tell him of their expectations: “We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel” (v. 21). Jesus’ way of responding to the Father has not fulfilled their expectations of the one who would redeem Israel. In fact, they know what one might be expected to know about Jesus, even the Easter message. They know of his life: Jesus of Nazareth, a prophet mighty in word and deed (v. 19). They know of his death: “Our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him” (v. 20). They know of the events at the tomb: “it is now the third day” (v. 21), women have been at the tomb early in the morning, but “they did not find his body” (v. 23). They have even heard the Easter proclamation: there has been a vision of angels who said: “He is alive!” (v. 23). If, perhaps the witness of the women was not enough, “some of those who were with us” have been to the tomb, and found it empty. “But him they did not see” (v. 24). These disciples know everything ... but him they did not see, and thus they have had enough. Unlike the women, they have not remembered the words of Jesus, and thus they continue their walk away from Jerusalem.

The practices of the Lukan Church meet the reader through the subsequent liturgy of the word, as Jesus chides them for their foolishness, and opens the word for them, explaining that it was necessary that the Christ should suffer many things to enter his glory (vv. 25-26). He “interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself” (v. 27). Jesus journeys with these disciples who have abandoned God’s journey that Jesus journeys, and he will eventually join with them at a Eucharistic meal. After the liturgy of the word (vv. 25-27), and before the breaking of the bread (vv. 30-31), some initiative must come from the erring disciples themselves. Has the word of Jesus made any impact upon them? The Greek behind 24:28 reads: “He pretended (proseptesato) to be going further.” Jesus has unfolded God’s plan through the explanation of the Scriptures. The disciples must now take some initiative. They respond generously: “Stay with us for it is toward evening, and the day is now far spent” (v. 29). As the Easter day draws to a close, the littleness of faith which led them to leave Jerusalem and the eleven is being overcome by the presence of the risen Lord (v. 15) and the instruction of his word (vv. 25-27). The process of repentance and forgiveness is under way (see v. 47).

At the meal the disciples recognized him in the breaking of the bread (vv. 30-31). Jesus has set out to follow and to journey with these failing disciples, as they walked away from God’s designs for his Messiah (see v. 26) and, implicitly, for those who would claim to be his followers. Yet he has come to meet them, to make himself known to them and to draw them back to the journey of God through opening the word of God to them, and through the breaking of the bread. ⁶ The memory of the many meals that Jesus has shared with them, and especially the meal he shared on the night before he died (22:14-38) opens their eyes. Touched by the word and presence in their failure, the immediate reaction of the failed disciples is to turn back on their journey: “And they rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem” (v. 33). The journey “away from Jerusalem” (v. 13: Greek: apo Ierousalem) has been reversed as they turn back “to Jerusalem” (v. 33: Greek: eis Ierousalem). Once they arrive back to the place they should never have abandoned and the eleven upon whom the community is founded, they find that Easter faith is already alive. They are told: “The Lord has risen indeed and has appeared to Simon” (v. 34).

The use of the name “Simon” calls for attention. As the Gospel opens, the reader comes to know of a man called “Simon” (4:38). Within the context of a miraculous catch of fish he is called to be a disciple of Jesus and Jesus introduces a new name for him “Peter” (see 5:8). The reader is reminded of this transformation in the Lukan list of the twelve apostles: “Simon, whom he named Peter” (6:14). From that point on, throughout the whole of the Gospel, he is called “Peter” (see 8:45, 51; 9:20, 28, 32-33; 12:41; 18:28). At the Last Supper, where the mingling of the themes of Jesus’ sharing his table with the broken and the commissioning of his future apostles is found, he is still “Peter” (22:8, 34, 54, 55, 58, 60-61). Only in foretelling his future denials does Jesus emphatically revert to the name he had before he became a disciple: “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you that he might sift you like wheat” (22:31). The return to “Peter” at the end of Jesus’ words is, in itself, a sign that all is not lost (v.34). Yet, it is to the failed Simon that the risen Lord has appeared, to restore him to his apostolic role (24:34). The name “Simon,” without any link with the apostolic name “Peter” appears only before this man’s call to be a follower of Jesus (4:18) and at the end of the Emmaus story, when two failing disciples are restored to God’s saving story which is taking place in Jerusalem. There another sinner, Simon, has also been blessed by the presence of the risen Lord (23:34).7

The failed disciples have come back home to another disciple who had failed his Lord. This return home, however, has happened

because the Lord has reached out to them in their brokenness, and made himself known to them in the breaking of the bread:

Here ... we find Jesus eating with outcasts, but this time the outcasts are two of his own disciples who have abandoned their journey of faith, fled Jerusalem, and embarked on their own journey. Jesus crosses the boundaries of disloyalty and breaks the bread of reconciliation with these disciples. Strengthened by the risen Jesus, Cleopas and his companion hasten back to Jerusalem and rejoin the journey of discipleship.8

Two disciples with inadequate faith had decided to walk “away from Jerusalem” (v. 13), and the Easter proclamation announced the presence of the risen Lord to the fragile Simon: “The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon” (v. 34). In this return to the meal table, Jesus is eating with his disciples again (see 22:15), and drinking again of the vine (22:18). The kingdom of God has been definitively established through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

3. The Risen Jesus Instructs and Commissions his Disciples (vv. 26-49)

The return of the two disciples from Emmaus to Jerusalem leads into Jesus’ final meal, celebrated with the eleven in the upper room (24:36-43). Although “the scene is intended to stress the identity and the physical reality of the risen Christ who has appeared to his disciples,”9 more is involved, as the close parallels between the experience of the Emmaus disciples and the experience of the eleven apostles indicate.

---

7 Most scholars see this return to “Simon” as an indication of the traditional nature of 24:34 (see 1 Cor 15:4). See, for example, Fitzmyer, Luke X-XXIV, 1569: “a stereotyped formula for appearances.” I am suggesting that there is a more subtle Lukan point at stake. For a similar suggestion, see Dillon, From Eye-Witnesses, 100, note 88. See also Tannehill, The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts, A Literary Interpretation (2 vols.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986-1990), 1:292-293.


experienced failure, in the person of Peter. But Peter’s denials have led him, in sorrow, to repentance (22:54-62). The disciples have experienced failure in the journey of Cleopas and his companion away from Jerusalem. But their disappointment with the way God has acted through his Christ, who had to suffer to come to glory, has been overcome by Jesus’ journeying with them, and opening the scriptures. They experienced the presence of the risen Lord at their table leading them to the repentance and forgiveness of sins (24:13-35).

As this is the case, a double dynamic is at work in Jesus’ commission to the apostles, and both elements will drive their future mission. All that Jesus has said is the fulfillment of God’s design, as mapped out in the Law of Moses, the prophets and the psalms. The suffering, crucified and risen Christ has fulfilled God’s design (vv. 44-46). Thus, in the first place, on the basis of their having witnessed the fulfillment of God’s design in and through the words and deeds of Jesus, they are to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins to all nations (v. 47). However, as has been made obvious in the two meal encounters in vv. 13-35 and vv. 36-43, on the basis of their own experience of repentance and forgiveness of sins, the apostles are commissioned to witness to all the nations (v. 47). They have witnessed the fulfillment of God’s design in the words and deeds of Jesus. Luke’s story tells of disciples and apostles who have experienced repentance and the forgiveness of sins in their own journeys with the Christ. They have experienced God’s compassion and forgiveness. Now they must wait in the city of Jerusalem. There the power from on high will be given to them, and from Jerusalem they will set out to preach repentance and the forgiveness of sins in the name of Jesus (vv. 47-49). They are eminently qualified to do so!\(^{10}\)

---

\(^{10}\) On the Easter appearances as a restoration of failed discipleship, see Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, 277-301. As he writes: “What was closed can be reopened” (p. 299). It must be, as the apostles are the main protagonists in the Acts of the Apostles.
4. The Ascension of Jesus (vv. 50-53)

The Gospel closes as Jesus leads his disciples out to Bethany. They are still in the regions of the city of Jerusalem, as they were when he led them to the Garden of Olives, a place adjacent to Bethany. He says no words, but raises his hands in blessing (v. 50). His journey began in Nazareth and will conclude in heaven, via the events that have occurred in the city of Jerusalem. It came to an end as he was carried up into heaven (v. 51). But another journey is about to begin, and the apostles return to Jerusalem, obedient to the command of Jesus (see v. 49). The passion, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus produces great joy among these founding figures, who will preach repentance and the forgiveness of sin, in Jesus’ name, to the whole world (v. 42). The Gospel ends where it began: in the Temple (see 1:5-24). But so much has been said and done between these two experiences in the Temple. Witnesses of all that has been said and done throughout this story, they will soon be clothed with the power from on high. The journey of disciples, who have experienced God’s compassion and forgiveness, and are not commissioned by his Son, is about to begin.

Conclusion

The Gospel of Luke, and supremely Luke 24, is a remarkable literary and theological achievement. Themes that have appeared across the narrative of the Gospel come to a climax as the story of Jesus’ life and departure ends. Other themes promise further expansion, as the Lucan story has not reached its conclusion. The risen Jesus cannot be found among the dead, but journeys with his Church, forgives its foundational members, and commissions them to be his witnesses. They have experienced compassion, repentance and forgiveness of sin from the Christ who had to suffer in order to fulfill the Scriptures. They are sent out to preach what they have experienced. As Jesus returns to his Father, the disciples joyfully return to the focal point of God’s saving plan, the city of Jerusalem. There they will wait for the gift of God’s power, and from there another journey will begin. They will witness to what they have seen and experienced, God’s compassion, repentance and the forgiveness of sin, to the ends of the earth (24:47-48).