

**Ascension Sunday + May 28, 2017**  
**Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit, WI**  
**Luke 24:44-53**

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“Famous last words.” Usually this phrase is used in a sarcastic manner, to counter a statement that is almost certainly not accurate. “I am never going to speak to her again in my life,” someone might say after a breakup. “Yeah, famous last words,” his friend replies.

But let’s think of it literally. What are some actual famous last words?

- Martin Luther said, “We are all beggars. This is true.”
- Composer Gustav Mahler’s last word was “Mozart!”
- When Harriet Tubman was dying in 1913, she gathered her family around and they sang together. Her last words were, “Swing low, sweet chariot.”
- Groucho Marx had one last comic moment. Just before he died he said, “This is no way to live!”
- Composer Percy Grainger, whose music was always cheerful and lighthearted, said to his wife, Ella, “You’re the only one I like.”
- Alfred Hitchcock’s dying words were, “One never knows the ending. One has to die to know exactly what happens after death, although Catholics have their hopes.”
- Maybe Steve Jobs, founder of Apple had a glimpse of what was to come: His last words were, “Oh wow. Oh wow. Oh, wow.”

We treasure the last words of those we love and attach particular importance to them.

Although my father always said was an atheist, he surprised us all with his last words: “Pray for me.” If we were able to be with our spouse at the moment of his or her death, perhaps we experienced something like Marie Lombardi did. In his dying breath, Vince turned to her and said, “Happy anniversary. I love you.”

In Luke’s gospel, the first Easter is a busy day. Jesus’ resurrection, his bodily appearances to the disciples, and his ascension all happen on that same day. As we heard in the reading from Acts, which Luke also wrote, there he allows for 40 days between

resurrection and ascension to underscore the sacred mystery of that time. Why 40? Because it is the Bible's most significant number, and often signifies trial, testing, or spiritual truth.

[What happened in 40 days? The great rainstorm that created the flood in the time of Noah; Moses on Mt. Sinai with God before he received the law and commandments; Jesus' temptation in the wilderness.]

Today we find ourselves at the very end of Luke's Gospel, where Jesus is speaking his last words. That means they are of special importance. Remember what he says to the disciples right before he ascends into heaven?

Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day,<sup>47</sup> and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.<sup>48</sup> You are witnesses of these things.

Just before this Jesus had opened all the disciples' minds to the Scriptures. So, for once, they believe and understand. In today's reading he is testifying about the truth of the Resurrection, and giving the disciples their mission in the world. That one sentence contains the entire panorama of salvation, including their mission: "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day,<sup>47</sup> and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem." And he is also assuring the disciples of their capacity to spread the good news to all the world: "You are witnesses of these things," he says.

Because the Bible is a living book, Jesus is also speaking to us. Are WE capable witnesses?

We have all probably had times when we were uncertain of our ability to be competent proclaimers of the Christian message. I know I have. This might be because we don't know all the answers, which is OK because doubt is an essential component of faith, or because our bodies will no longer support us in all things we would like to do, or carry us to all the places we'd like to go.

But when we question our competence as witnesses because our bodies are compromised by ill health or old age, remember that the body of the ascending Jesus was also compromised. What did his body look like at that time? I glanced at several pieces of art on the Ascension, including the painting by Rembrandt, and they all made Jesus' body look perfect. But in fact it bore all the scars of his crucifixion. There were holes in his hands and feet, which the disciples took as evidence that Jesus was appearing to them in his actual body. Jesus also had a gash in his side from the spear that one of the soldiers pierced him with while he was on the cross. Plus there were scars on his back from the flogging he endured while he was in captivity.

The ascending Jesus, then, is essentially a disabled God. His scars are markers of his identity, just as ours are. We limp; we have a bad hip or knee, or both knees; we move slowly; we are dealing with cancer or its aftermath; we struggle to muster the strength with which to go about our daily tasks. Or perhaps we are scarred psychologically or spiritually from terrible experiences that God miraculously brought us through. Yet those scars still remain as a part of who we are.

The point is that, even in his broken body, Jesus fulfilled God's plan for salvation by ascending to be with his Father. His disability was taken up into God, and his body and life was then poured out into world through the bread and wine, through community wherever the faithful are gathered, and for all the suffering who crave the consolation of forgiveness and the assurances of the hope that the certain knowledge of eternal life in Christ provides.

This invites us to see disability in a completely different way. Instead of treating people with disabilities as if are different or deficient, what if we told them how very much like Jesus they are? In so doing, we are testifying to abundant love and boundless forgiveness that lies at the heart of the gospel. We are being witnesses.

So not only are we, disabled persons ourselves, fully able to be witnesses just as we are, but we are empowered by our encounters with God in Christ, in the Eucharist, in community, in the privacy of our daily prayers, to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins in Jesus' name to all people, each of us in our own way. I would love to have a time when we can all come together and tell stories of how we have experienced God's presence and participation in our lives; some of you have already shared with me something of these grace-filled encounters.

In today's gospel Jesus is sending us out to spread the repentance and forgiveness that he preached about his entire life. We do this with our bodies, and some even sacrifice their bodies and lives for this purpose. German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was such a person. In 1939, with war brewing in Europe, he came to America for a year to teach at Union Theological Seminary in New York. He easily could have remained here. Yet during that year he wrote to a friend,

I have come to the conclusion that I made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period in our national history with the people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people.

Bonhoeffer returned home and eventually became involved with other leaders of the Protestant church in Germany in an unsuccessful plot to overthrow Hitler. In 1943 he was captured and sent to the Buchenwald concentration camp. He was hanged in April 1945, just two weeks before American soldiers liberated the camp.

Bonhoeffer used his body and gave his life to witness to the living God. In death he remains the most influential Lutheran theologian on the world stage, after Martin Luther himself, because he used his abilities as teacher and writer to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins in Jesus' name to all nations. Let us pray that, even in our broken bodies and in the midst of our doubts, we find the strength we need to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins in Jesus' his name, in whatever way God is calling us. Amen.