

Staying for the Spirit

Our New Testament reading is Luke 24:36-53. Our text finds the risen Jesus appearing to his disciples while they were discussing the testimony of the Emmaus disciples, who had been with the risen Lord. Follow as I read **Luke 24:36-49**:

³⁶ While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." ³⁷ They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. ³⁸ He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? ³⁹ Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." ⁴⁰ And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. ⁴¹ While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" ⁴² They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³ and he took it and ate in their presence.

⁴⁴ 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, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." ⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶ and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

As you've heard by now, our church Session and Property and Finance Committee members have been involved in a process of evaluation of the church's strengths and weaknesses and a prayerful look into God's future for Dale Heights Presbyterian Church. This process is called Project Regeneration, led by consultants from the Presbyterian Foundation (PCUSA). Through prayer and reading, and an honest assessment of our strengths and weaknesses, we've been reminded of our absolute dependence on the Holy Spirit, to both understand and embrace our circumstances, calling and future. The words of the risen Jesus to his first disciples to stay until they would be clothed with the spirit seem particularly timely for us (49). I suggest that without this command and its results in our lives, our going, doing, giving, and working, even our attempts at being better people personally and as a church, are destined for futility.

Since these words of Jesus and the coming of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost 2000 years ago, the Spirit has come and has been doing his mighty kingdom work. And those of us who are followers of Jesus realize we received the Spirit of God when we first believed in Jesus. And perhaps we've also come to understand that as followers of Jesus we depend on the Holy Spirit in order to live for and serve Jesus well. What's certain is that we all need to learn to "stay for the Spirit," whether for the first time as a new Christian or, as in the case of us older followers of Jesus, as a pattern of living.

That verb "to stay" means literally "to sit" or "to remain" for a specific purpose. As a long-time follower of Jesus I'm just now learning that the risen Jesus wants me to stay until his blessings become a part of my daily experience.

Jesus appeared to his disciples to make unmistakably clear that he'd been raised bodily from death and the grave. He was no phantom of their imagination nor a shadowy ghost. Jesus' resurrection body was a physical, even if a trans-physical body, capable of exceeding our present bodily limitations but just as real as our earthly bodies. Jesus presented himself for the disciples' examination and even ate a piece of fish to display his real, physical presence.

Jesus greeted the disciples with “Peace be with you.” “Shalom,” or peace, is more than the absence of conflict or war. The peace that the risen Jesus brings is a right relationship with God, the healing of forgiveness of sin and the removal of guilt, and the health and wholeness of mind and spirit under the renewing grace of God. The risen Jesus gave the disciples the blessing of eternal and abundant life, lived in peace with God and aligned with his kingdom purposes.

If we stay for the Spirit we’ll realize that Jesus lives and his kingdom is among us and even within us. We’ll realize the risen Jesus reigns over this world and over the circumstances of our lives, and that we’re a part of his kingdom coming to fulfillment on this earth. To know that Jesus’ is physically raised tells us that the kingdom of God is not “otherworldly” but has invaded and is transforming this physical, tangible, yet fallen world. It’s to know that these bodies of ours, though decaying and wasting away, will be transformed and fitted for eternity. Thus we treat them as Spirit-inhabited temples of God. And we regard the creation and, yes, the suffering environment as created and soon-to-be redeemed as the new heaven and earth, and we thus treat it with care and respect. And we view everyone as a creature with an everlasting destiny of being like Jesus or like the devil himself.

Jesus gives the disciples in the Upper Room an unforgettable Bible study. When we stay for the Spirit and let the risen Jesus teach us from his word, we can’t be mere academics with Scripture, endlessly debating obscure and/or controversial passages. We’ll understand that the Bible comes alive by the Holy Spirit as the voice of God to us. Jesus reminded the disciples that the word of God will be fulfilled in every part, from the first prophecies of Genesis to the last ones of Revelation (v.44).

It’s the risen Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, who opens our minds to understand the truth of the word. Jesus “opened their minds so that they could understand the Scriptures” (v.45). Apart from the Spirit of God, writes Paul, we can’t understand spiritual truth (1 Cor. 2:14). Even as regenerated children of God who have the Spirit, we don’t read the Bible as though it were dead history or propositional truth for others. We must read it with a spirit of expectancy, praying to the Spirit of God to open our eyes to show us the wonderful truths God has for us (Ps. 119:18). So, we must stay for the Spirit.

In my personal walk with God, the word is essential to guide, guard and encourage me (Ps. 119:105). And in my darkest hours I’ve found the essential encouragement of Scripture that always gives me hope (Rom. 15:4). It’s essential that we have frequent time alone with the risen Lord Jesus. His word comes often through Scripture but also from unexpected sources.

After parking my car at a fitness club where I belonged, a young mom was assisting her children out of her car on their way to the childcare center. She yelled a warning to her little boy, who was headed unsupervised away from the car, “Stay right there!” she commanded, and then took his hand as she led her kids. It was as if the Lord told me to stay, to be certain I was holding his hand before I plunged into my encounters, with potential for good or ill. And sure enough, in just a moment I encountered an irritating situation, when I was tempted to return rudeness with rudeness.

When we listen to Jesus speak from the word, his word to us, it’s always about following him in the awareness of his presence and our constant dependence on him to guide our conversations and guard our spirits. And the only way we can follow him and be of use to him is through our cross, a cruciform life of dying to self-centered self and losing our lives in his (Matt. 10:38f). When Jesus speaks to us he always gives the invitation, in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, to “come and die.”

This is why the Bible is not a dead text for the curious, but rather a dangerous text for the complacent and a new way of living for the serious disciples of Jesus.

We must stay for the Spirit, who's the key to everything we need for life and eternity. He's the one who is "God with us" and God within us, now that the risen Jesus is ascended to heaven. He's the one who transforms us into the children of God and makes us day by day into a greater likeness of Jesus himself (2 Cor. 3:18). The presence of the Spirit in us is the key to every blessing. We've every right and reason to keep on asking, seeking and knocking before the throne of grace because we are seeking, not selfish little things for ourselves, but for the life of God, the fullness of the Holy Spirit himself, who is the source of everything else we need.

All of the disciples knew that, having faltered in their faith, fled from the scene of Jesus' execution, and even having denied him, they needed something to happen in them in order to do the work he'd commissioned them to do. When we take Scripture seriously, and Jesus teaches us in our time of listening prayer, we realize just how much we need, yes depend on the Holy Spirit.

Think of Peter's miserable failure in his three-fold denial of the Lord here in Luke's gospel. But in Volume Two, Acts, Peter is the courageous, indomitable witness, preacher and leader of the church militant and triumphant. The character change in all of the disciples is due to the staying for the Spirit, who would clothe them with power from on high (49).

When we turn our lives to Jesus Christ, we immediately receive the Holy Spirit. But we must learn what it means to be baptized in the Holy Spirit, who seeks control of our lives. To love and honor Jesus, and to let him love through us are the conditions for being filled with the Holy Spirit. And throughout our lives and as a daily practice we must stay for the Spirit. That means that daily I must stay still before the risen Lord Jesus and ask him to cover me, to clothe me with his Spirit. I must ask him to make me mindful of his loving presence and of the encouragement and direction he gave to me from his word. Only after my life is centered in the risen Jesus and filled with his Spirit am I ready to face the world, the flesh and the devil.

Throughout the day, at times I must stop before making that phone call, or writing that sermon or entering that meeting or sanctuary. I must stop and wait for the Spirit, for the risen Jesus, to guide me, protect me and empower me as his servant, witness and messenger. We all need to just stop throughout the day and for a few moments do nothing but stay. Pray and wait for the reminder that Jesus is alive and within you. Stay for the word to be clear to you once again as you make that your prayer. Stay for the Spirit while you are waiting for the computer to power up; when waiting at a spotlight; or for your turn in the doctor's office.

When we learn to stay for the Spirit we have a joy-inducing awareness of the risen Lord. As David wrote and sang, "You will fill me with joy in your presence" (Ps. 16:11). We must stay for the Spirit to find the joy that comes with his presence and word conveyed to our hearts by the Spirit. The believer's joy is not dependent on circumstances, as is happiness. Our joy is actually a discipline, or at least it comes from the discipline of our personal and corporate worship and our practice of Christ's presence. When we focus on Jesus, he gives us his peace and assurance of his love and grace. The result is joy, that sense of well-being, of spiritual wholeness and health as was announced by the risen Lord Jesus (v.36). Like these disciples, when we stay for the Spirit we'll become worshipers "in spirit and in truth" (Jn. 4:23f). We'll be joyful worshipers, who praise God, delighting in him and finding our joy in him (v.52).

The moment we place our trust in Jesus, turning from a life pattern of sin and self, and begin a life of loving obedience, we're born from above, of the Holy Spirit. Now we have the Holy Spirit. Rather, *he has us!* The Holy Spirit is not a gaseous substance that must continuously fill us. The Medieval superstition of saying "Bless you!" to the person who sneezes is based on the idea that the Holy Spirit is a ghost inside us, who's expelled from our bodies when we sneeze and then received back inside us with the words, "Bless you!" The Spirit is the omnipresent God within, as Paul says, "Christ in you" (Col. 1:27).

Begin each day by staying for the Spirit in listening prayer. Before each task and personal encounter remind yourself of God's word to you and realize the presence of the risen Jesus within you. Sometimes the most eloquent and practical prayer we can say is "Help me, Jesus!" This is staying for the Spirit. "Help me to do your will. Help me to express faith through love for this person. Help me through this temptation to emerge a victor through the risen, living Lord Jesus."

No parent would think of letting a small child wander off by herself, unprotected, undirected and undetected. Recently I wanted to call out to a child walking too far ahead of his parent in a crowded parking lot, "Stay right there for your daddy!" Remember all the times your child ran off ahead of you and you called out, "Wait! Stay right where you are!" And then you caught up with your child. God the Father wants to be our protector, guide and keeper, and he wants us to join him in kingdom living. Our order from the Master is, "Stay for the Spirit!"

O, how I need the Spirit, who gives peace in the midst of the storm, joy in the midst of gloom, and the grace to love in the presence of our enemies! His presence is the key to living with joy, peace and Christ-like love for others. I must stay for him, for the awareness of his presence and my dependence on him, each hour of every day. These weeks, as your Session and Property and Finance members engage in our 40 Weeks of Prayer, we need especially to stay for the Spirit as he guides us toward the future, which is yet unknown to us but is surely known to God