

Dear Theophilus

Luke 24:44-53 & Acts 1:1-2

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Prayer: O God, your ascended Son embodies our hope for resurrection and full life with you. Send your Spirit of revelation and wisdom, that in the freedom of hope, we may be witnesses to the continuing life of our Lord: the grace of forgiveness, the work of justice, the healing of the nations...

The writer of the gospel of Luke wrote two books in the Bible; they make up one large literary project. However, in our Bibles we have the gospel of John in between them. This writer who finishes Luke's gospel with the reading you just heard from our Deacon, also wrote the book of Acts; so this one hand wrote about 1/3 of the New Testament material. Acts 1:1-2 picks up right where Luke ends and continues the story. The gospel tells the story of Jesus during his life on earth beginning with his birth and ending with the eye witness accounts to his resurrection.

Matthew's gospel begins with the "begats," in the King James Version, Abraham begat Isaac, Isaac begat Jacob, Jacob begat Judah and his brothers and so on. It describes the genealogy that leads to the birth of Jesus, but Luke's gospel begins with a dedication to Theophilus, in a style which is common in Greek letters of the day. At the beginning of Luke, it says:

Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.¹

Acts also begins with a dedication to Theophilus, ...which in Greek means, God lover or friend of God "theo," the Greek word for God, "philus", friend or loved one. It could be a person's name or just the group of people who love God, who call themselves "friends of God." It is someone who is interested in hearing the story of the early church.

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.²

Acts begins with Jesus' ascension and then tells the story of what happened in the early church, how they went from being mere disciples, (wandering around with Jesus, asking foolish questions, doubting themselves and the power of their faith) to full blown apostles able to continue Jesus' legacy of teaching and healing, and many of them suffering execution as Jesus did, making even the worst moment of their lives an inspiration to those who knew them... Acts tells us how the story became known outside of Jerusalem and was spread throughout the world. But I am getting ahead of my story. Pentecost is next week.

At the end of Luke's gospel, we're asked to begin making connections between everything written down in scripture, and everything we know, because something really good is coming next. Jesus says:

¹ Luke 1:1-4

² Acts 1:1-2

"...*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.*" Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures...³

I'd like to point out for all of you fans of mysteries and science fiction, Dr Who, and Harry Potter. This is the portal. We have arrived. We are standing at the door finally with the golden key in our hands, after an arduous long journey through this gospel story, the birth, the triumphs, the times he was not received well, the events in Jerusalem, his death and resurrection, we stand, ready to unlock the conclusion. We open the door: what do we see? It's Jesus, in the flesh.

Jesus is the unifying theory. Jesus makes all of the past, the Bible as we have it, all of history, our present lives, and our future, one. The New Testament is at great pains to show that Jesus is the fulfillment of prophecy and even the psalms, which when you read them you might not think need fulfillment -- are fulfilled -- this writer makes the case three times, twice in Luke and once in Acts that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Psalms⁴. Those songs and prayers written down in the first person, personal and prayed through for millennia have an answer in our risen Lord.

And after the mysteries have all been solved. After we get the full account of this carpenter's son from Galilee. After the puzzle pieces connect and lock into place, he ascends into heaven, out of their sight, which although astonishing, should ring a bell, like the prophet Elijah did. There was no body left at the end of his life, to bury, there never was a funeral, he took it with him, and he appears to be using it, still...

To this very day I have learned that you cannot declare someone dead without a body. There is no investigation into a murder without a corpse. No mystery to be solved. We have another category for those presumed dead... Jesus and Elijah before him never were. Jesus is visible; Jesus is living.

Which is where I would like to invite you into some reflection on what you know about living.



This image is on the on the west side of the Marquette Club building in Kansas City, MO. The artist, Jay Norton says that "the astronaut represents the glory of scientific achievement. Jesus, ascending, represents humanity's spiritual ideal and ultimate reward. Both are ascending to the heavens - one by rocket, the other by the divine hand of God. Both have to have a lot of faith." He goes on to say: "hopefully this will serve as a little question mark for the neighborhood. Ultimately, the origin of our planet and species is a mystery that will never be completely solved within our lives. Choosing sides [either way is] clinging to ideology [that is ultimately] all about faith. And that is a fact."⁵

What does an ascending Jesus reveal to a world that puts astronauts in space? That sends missions to Mars? That knows that our galaxy is one of many, that our universe is part of multi-verses.

³ Luke 24: 44b-45

⁴ Luke 20:42; Luke 24: 44; Acts 1:20

⁵<https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/diglib-fulldisplay.pl?SID=20210514573186573&code=ACT&RC=54144&Row=5> comments from the artist

To be more practical, I'd like to encourage you to lift up also your own experience in the last year of this pandemic. Think about all the people you have been separated from, think about whether they are living or no longer living. Where they are, how you continue to relate to them even under these circumstances.

What has been so very hard for us about recording our services and not being in person, is that we are missing our people – in the flesh. How great to sing together, to see you smile, to know you are well, to hear your voice. But we know we are still together, living our lives, although apart. I have learned that from you, dear Theophilus. In the important ways we have stayed together. We can see that on YouTube there are many views, so many of you have been generous and kind throughout this difficult time. Notes in the mail, pledges given, calls made. Supporting the church, pitching in with outreach projects, helping us to be the church without a building, even when we cannot do anything at all the way we used to. We have grown in ways that we did not intend to, connected with people as they travelled, while they were sick, in other time zones; and being apart has made it harder certainly. But it is still real. And it will still go on. And this is what it is to be one who loves God, my dear Theophilus. Jesus ascended, we have entered this other dimension and found each other and our faith.

What is real? Who is real? How will you keep your faith? You are holding the key after this long journey... open the door, it is Jesus in the flesh. And Jesus loves you. Always has.

Luke's gospel ends but everything in the account has been leading to the conclusion that this gospel has not ended really, it is being continued now in other dimensions. New geography, new languages, new people, new time zones, even online. God is at work and something marvelous is about to happen, my dear Theophilus.

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