

Luke 24:44-53 *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." 45Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. 46He told them, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, 47and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. 48You are witnesses of these things. 49I 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." 50When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. 51While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. 52Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. 53And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.*

Dear friends in Christ our Savior,

If you had to narrow it down to the one reason that God has left you on this earth...what would you say? It's a bit of a deep question to think about. There are perhaps many reasons you could point to: raising your children, providing for your family, leading employees at work, helping people less fortunate might be a few thoughts that come readily to your mind. But pick 1 and choose that pick from God's perspective: What is the 1 reason for which you exist and for which God has left you on this earth? Think about it this way: if God's goal is for all of his people to be with him in heaven, then why doesn't he take his people to heaven the moment he brings them to faith? Why does he leave them here on this earth where they have to face hardships and challenges and tragedies and suffering? Why doesn't he instantly remove them from this earth to enjoy the eternal life in heaven he has promised to each person who believes in him? There is 1 reason we can point to—1 reason why God has left every single one of you on this earth: To be his witnesses. If God took every believer instantly to heaven the moment they came to faith, who would be here to tell other people about him? Who would be here to point people to him as the source of love and life? Who would be here to witness for him and reveal his plan of salvation to the hordes of people around us who so desperately need to hear about him? No one. So God has left you on this earth to carry out this mission of being his spokespeople to the world. He has left you here so that you can witness to the resurrection of Jesus and proclaim his love and peace to give people hope for their eternity. This is the 1 reason for which you exist.

This may sound a little bit basic, but I think it's important to get back to the basics of what we are all about. There is a bit of uncertainty right now about the future. I know that many of you are looking into the future and all you see is the fog of uncertainty. When faced with the fog of uncertainty, it is easy to get lost in the present, unable to see a path around the obstacle in front of you and let fear and worry start to rule your heart and your life. The best thing to do at times like these is to get back to the basics. Getting back to the basics reminds us what we are all about. It reminds us who we are, the work God has given us to carry out, and the promises he made to support and sustain us. Being reminded of why we exist, what our purpose is and what goal we are striving towards helps to bring clarity to our future. It not only reminds us of our destination but gives us a road which we can follow along the way. As we celebrate the ascension of our Lord Jesus today, we have the opportunity to do this very thing. God takes us back to the basics to give us **Clarity for the Future**.

In some ways, you might say that Jesus was commissioning his disciples for their work before he left this world. Jesus knew that he was about to leave this world. He knew the uncertainty his disciples would face being left on this earth without him physically present to direct and lead them. He didn't want that uncertainty to lead to fear and worry on their part. So he gave them direction to follow as they went about their work after he left. Commissioning ceremonies do 2 things: they tell people what they are to do and they give them the power and authority to carry out that work. Listen to Jesus' words as he commissioned his disciples: *"Repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. 48You are witnesses of these things. 49I 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."* What a mission Jesus gave to his disciples! He laid out their work and promised to give them the power to carry it out. They were to be his witnesses preaching repentance for the forgiveness of sins starting at Jerusalem and carrying this work out to all nations out to the ends of the earth.

That's a daunting task! But Jesus didn't leave his disciples alone to carry out this work. He both equipped them for their task and promised to send help along the way. For them to be witnesses to all the things they had seen and heard, they needed to be certain that they knew exactly what it was they had heard and seen. To give them certainty, Jesus prepared them for their work by opening the scriptures for them. People had so many different ideas about what happened with Jesus. For many people, to think that their Messiah had died was unconscionable. Jesus opened the Scriptures to remind them that this is exactly what had to take place. His death and resurrection were prophesied throughout the entire OT. For him to be the Messiah he claimed to be, He had to fulfill everything the OT said about him. Jesus reminded them about what they saw with their own eyes. They saw that what happened to Jesus was everything the OT said was going to happen. You can almost see the light going on in their minds. They began to realize that Jesus' death and resurrection had gained for them not an earthly victory or kingdom, but a spiritual victory and a heavenly kingdom. Even though they didn't fully grasp all of this at that point, Jesus promised that he and the Father would send the Holy Spirit as a counselor to help them understand the message and proclaim it with confidence.

With the understanding and confidence the Holy Spirit would bring to them, they were to preach the forgiveness of sins and repentance to the ends of the earth. Their task was simply to be eyewitnesses to the world about what they saw.

Their mission was to go into all the world and preach the good news of Christ's death and resurrection for the salvation of all people. They existed to share their story with all the people they came into contact with. Though they didn't know what the future held, the path they were to follow was to be about the work of making disciples for Jesus by baptizing them and by teaching them to obey all that Jesus had commanded them. They didn't have to make up their own story. They didn't need to invent clever schemes or twist people's arms to get them to believe. All they had to do was tell people what Jesus had done for them and trust that the Holy Spirit would bring about the results.

When Jesus gave this mission to his disciples, he did not limit it to just those disciples who were before him that day. He gave this mission to his church of all time! As disciples of Christ, our purpose and reason for existence is the same. Our mission in life and the purpose for existing is to be witnesses for Christ—to tell people what we have seen and heard about our Savior. We may not have seen these things physically with our own eyes, but we have seen them through the eyes of faith. This entire first half of the Church Year has been designed to lead you to place the prophecies of Jesus against the actual accounts to see for yourself how Jesus perfectly fulfilled them. We have focused on Jesus' birth, his ministry, his death and his resurrection. You have seen in Scripture how everything has been fulfilled and taken care of for your salvation. You are eyewitnesses through the eyes of faith. Your task is the same as that of these disciples—to be about the work of witnessing what you have seen and heard to the world. The process for us is the same as it was for Jesus' disciples: Grow in faith as you study the Word. As you study God's Word, you become more sure and certain of your Savior and the eternity that awaits. As you become more sure, you go out and witness this to the world.

I know that you have heard this from me a million times. Yet I think it is important to go back to the basics at a time like this to give us some clarity to the future. These last few weeks have brought mission and ministry directly before our eyes. While I know that many aren't happy with the call process that we use, it does force us to go back to the basics every single time and remind us what we are all about. Even though we don't like it, it serves to remind us whose church this is and it forces us to trust that he will always act in our best interest. You know me. I don't like to beat around the bush and hint at things. I think it is valuable to hit issues head on and deal with what is before us. I have gotten the sense over this past week as people talk about my call, that there is a great fear among some that if I take this call, everything is going to fall apart. I know for a fact that this worry and fear is out there. There's the fear that I will be gone and my wife will be gone. We're past the calling window for teachers. There's no clear path forward. There are no evident or ready or clear or quick answers. There are just hard decisions that have to be made. There will be some uncomfortable moments. While I appreciate the trust and confidence that you have in me and my wife, I feel the need to gently remind you: I am not the Lord of the Church. Jesus is. His ascension today reminds us of that. He is sitting on heaven's throne guiding the affairs of the world for the benefit of his church. We are only humble servants. This isn't Pastor Vann's church. It's Jesus' Church. He is ruling victoriously on heaven's throne for the good of his church and promises to always provide for the needs of his people. He is the one who promises that if we just seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, then everything else will be given to us as well. It is good for us to go back to the basics and be reminded of what all this is about.

Jesus has commissioned you and sent you out to be his witnesses to the world. He is the one with all power and authority sitting on heaven's throne working for the benefit of his people. He has promised to send the Holy Spirit to you to give you understanding, strength and power to carry out this mission. The Holy Spirit who calls also promises to provide for his people. While I understand the connection we have to one another because of our work together, it is good to be reminded that the Good Shepherd is watching over all of us and will always hold us safely in his hands. Focusing our attention on the basics helps us to keep our focus on what is most important and keeps our trust where it belongs.

So I know that there is a great deal of uncertainty about the future. The thought of things changing makes us uncomfortable and uneasy. Worry and fear can easily grip us when we focus on the problems before us and don't have any of the immediate answers. Remember, Jesus already took care of your greatest problem when he offered his life to rescue you from your sin and give you access into heaven. Let's take a step back and look at this with a big picture perspective. Let's pay attention to the basics and remind ourselves what this is all about. Let's focus our attention on who is the head of the Church and the promises he has made to watch over and provide for the needs of his people. Regardless of who we are, where we are in life, where we live in life or who is leading us from an earthly perspective, it doesn't change our mission nor the work God has placed before us. God has left every one of us on this earth for 1 purpose: to be his witnesses to the world. We exist on this earth to proclaim his message and make disciples for him through baptizing and teaching. Let's be about the work God has given us to do focused on his mission. That is what gives us **Clarity for the Future**. Amen.