

**Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,  
by Dr. David Fischler, on Sunday, May 17, 2015**

**LAST WORDS**

**Luke 24:44-53**

You've all heard the expression, I'm sure, "famous last words." Some really are. You may or may not have heard these particularly, but if you go to lists of "famous last words" the chances are that you'll see at least some of these. For instance, Groucho Marx, on his deathbed said, "Die, my dear? Why, that's the last thing I'll ever do." What can you say? The man was prophetic. Pablo Picasso, ever the narcissist, said on his deathbed, "Drink to me!" I guess when you can sell a painting for \$180,000,000 you should. Thomas Edison cryptically said, "It's very beautiful over there." Makes you wonder what he saw. The Civil War general John Sedgewick, moments before being hit by sniper fire, remarked, "They couldn't hit an elephant at this distance." I don't know how much he weighed but I'm sure he regretted that expression. And last words of Mother Theresa were, appropriately, "Jesus, I love you."

Well today we look at a different set of last words. There are several sets of these, actually, in Matthew 28 and in Acts chapter 1. Today we're going to focus on Luke 24 and on what the gospel writer describes as the last words of Jesus. He doesn't use that expression, but that's what they are. They begin in verse 44, but first a word about the setting. As you know, this is after the crucifixion and resurrection. During the 40 days after His resurrection Jesus appeared multiple times to hundreds of His disciples. This was not just simply a matter of He appeared to one person and then maybe two people and then we have them testifying to what they imagined. You could understand if people thought that under those circumstances that these were folks who just made something up. But He appeared to hundreds of His disciples. Hundreds of them at the same time, according to Paul in 1 Corinthians 15. And He did that in order to make clear that He was really alive, that He was not simply a ghost. He was not a disembodied hallucination as so many people through the centuries have assumed He must have been, in part because they discount that He appeared to so many people. But He also wanted them to know that He had a real body. Even though it was transformed – Paul describes it as a spiritual body – nevertheless it was real. Yes, this was a Person who now walked through closed doors, but He was also a Person into whose side you could put your fingers and touch Him. You could touch the wounds in His hands. He ate with His disciples. His body was real and the gnostic fantasy that the purpose of resurrection is to release us from the material world and to enable us to no longer have anything to do with it, is belied in Jesus' own body.

He wanted them to know, too, that everything had happened that had happened in fulfillment of biblical prophecy and His own. That, yes, He had suffered at the hands of sinful men, and, yes, He had died a terrible death, and that was as it was supposed to be. I'll say more about that in just a moment. Finally, He came to them in order to tell them that there was still work to be done on earth, and we'll get back to that in just a moment, as well.

The events in this passage, verses 44-53, take place in two different places. The first part takes place in Jerusalem and the second part takes place in the small village of Bethany on the far side of the Mount of Olives, the side that faces away from Jerusalem. The Jerusalem conversation consists of four parts: First, He wanted them to know that all that had happened had been spoken of prophetically in the Old Testament. In verse 44 He says 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.” None of this happened ad hoc. None of this happened by chance. None of what Jesus did was simply because it seemed like a good idea at the time or, for that matter, a bad idea at the time. All that had happened had been prophesied. And there are a couple of reasons why He mentions that to them and why that’s still important to us. One is that it means the Old Testament was still normative for them and it is still normative for us. We may not set it aside because its foundational for Christian revelation. Sad to say, at various times in the Christian church there has been an impulse to lay the Old Testament aside and to say, “Well, that was for *then* and that was for *them*,” whereas in fact the Old Testament is for *now* and it is for *us*. One of the most notorious efforts at doing that took place early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the church in Germany, where in response to the rise of the Nazis and their denigration and rejection of all things Jewish, the Lutheran Church, the state church in Germany, sought to set aside the Old Testament, to say in effect that it was a lesser and no longer necessary scripture. I don’t know that that position was ever taken formally. The church was so split before World War II began that it might be that it never was able to actually do that formally. But certainly there were those in the leadership of the Lutheran Church who wanted very much to do that.

In our day there are those who would like, even if unofficially, to do that as well. In the mainline denominations there has been a movement for years to simply say, “Well, there may be bits and pieces of the Old Testament that are still valuable, things like the Ten Commandments, or at least part of them. Things like some of the words of the prophets. And yes, we can learn from things in the historical books. But there’s an awful lot in the Old Testament that we simply don’t need anymore. For instance, the moral law. We can simply jettison that because we no longer need to hear that. We no longer need the guidance of the moral law because, having been set free in Jesus we are now free to live as we choose.” And if that sounds strange, that’s the theological and biblical foundation for the movement in favor of gay rights in the mainline church.

So Jesus was telling them, “Even though these things have happened, they happened because God intended them all along. And if you would understand My mission, if you would understand My purpose, if you would understand the significance of what I’ve done, go back to the words of the prophets and the psalms and the Law of Moses.” In fact, in the early church that’s exactly what they did. You’ll remember in Acts 17 Paul speaking to a group of people called the Bereans who zealously checked everything that Paul said against his Letter to the Galatians. No. They checked everything he said zealously against the Word of God which they understood to be the Old Testament. Every day he taught them and every day they checked what he said against the Law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms, just as we are to do as well.

Well, the other reason why He mentions this is to make clear, as I said before, that this was not an accident. This was not simply a matter of God having His plans go awry and making things up as they went along. Again, unfortunately, there are those in our day, at least some of whom go by the name of dispensationalists, who would say that the crucifixion and resurrection were not God's original plan. That in fact it was Jesus' purpose in coming into the world to set up the Kingdom of God in Jerusalem and to bring in the Kingdom of God in its fullness, and that because Judaism and the leaders of Judaism rejected Jesus, God had to go to Plan B. Not to put too fine a point on it, but you are plan B. You get that, right? The ministry to the Gentiles was not part of the original purpose. That was Plan B. It only came about after the crucifixion and then God's response to the crucifixion, which was the resurrection. Well, in response to those who claim that, Jesus says, "No, this was the plan all along. This was the way God intended it to be."

So that's the first thing that Jesus did, the first part of this conversation. He spoke to them of what the Old Testament said about Him. And then, we're told in verses 45 and 46, He opened their minds so that they could understand the Scripture. He told them that this was what is written, that Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day. He did more, though, than just indicate that the events that had just recently taken place and had taken place over the course of the last three years were prophesied. He also gave them their significance in verse 47. "This is what is written – that Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem." What that tells us is that His mission ultimately was about the reconciliation to those whom God was calling into His Kingdom with the Father. And second, that it was about transformation of life and not just forgiveness. *Repentance* and forgiveness of sins will be preached in His name. Forgiveness of sins, the purpose or significance of that is obvious. We're all sinful people. We all fall short of the glory of God, as Paul puts it in Romans 3. We all are in need of reconciliation with God because we violated the standards that He has laid out for us so clearly in His Word. And so we are called by the preaching of the Gospel to receive that forgiveness. And part of what is involved in receiving that forgiveness is the transformation of the life that is at odds with God.

That's where repentance comes in. Many of you have heard me say that there are twelve Greek words that every Christian should know, whether you're a Greek scholar or not. One of them is the word that is here translated "repentance" – *metanoia*. *Metanoia* means "transformation." And it even has a picture that comes with it. The picture is of someone going in the wrong direction and turning around, 180 degrees. You remember the old gospel hymn *We're Marching to Zion*? Before you became a Christian you could have sung that exact same hymn except you would have had to change the words and say, "We're marching to hell." We are marching straight in the direction of condemnation. God is over here, as it were, and we're walking that way. The Garden of Eden is over here and we see a cliff and a 4,000 foot drop that will obliterate our body at the bottom, and we like the cliff and we're marching right toward it. So repentance says turn around, look where you're going. Is that really where you want to go? Is that really the direction you want to head? When your Creator, your Father is calling you, do you really want to

run the other way? You want to turn around. You want to run into His arms. You want to have the robe of royalty put on your shoulder and you want to have Him tell you, “All is forgiven my son, a feast is prepared and you are the guest of honor.”

So repentance and forgiveness of sins, reconciliation with God, transformation of life. All of these events Jesus’ incarnation, His baptism, His transfiguration, His life, His healing, His preaching and teaching, His exorcisms – all of that leading into His suffering, His trial, His crucifixion, His death and burial and then His glorious resurrection. All of this was about changing everything. Not only for the disciples who then, at that moment, stood before Him, but for all who would come after them. And that’s where we come to the third part of what this conversation was about. He told them their role in God’s plans. Verse 48 echoing Acts Chapter 1 where Luke, in another version of Jesus’ last words, has Him say, “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, here at home, in Judea and in Samaria, in your extended communities, and to the ends of the earth.” Here, he says simply to them, “You are witnesses of these things. You’ll preach in My name to all nations, beginning here, at Jerusalem, and the way that you will do that is by declaring that you are witnesses to what has happened.” They were to bring it – not just to Jews, not just to Israel – but to all nations. And they were to do so not as uninvolved, objective reporters. Wait a minute. Did I just imply that reporters are objective? Sorry. A slip of the tongue. They were not historians. They were not simply objective recorders of facts. They were witnesses. They were part of these events. They had seen them first hand. They knew what had happened, not because someone told them, and not simply because they were standing outside and recorded what they were told at the press conference. They were part of the action, and so they could relate what Jesus had done on the basis of firsthand knowledge and then they could also relate what they did.

Think about that for just a second. Do you know why we are told that Peter denied Jesus three times? Is it because there was a guy from AP outside who heard him tell people and say, “Boy, this is big news. The future leader of Jesus’ apostles says he doesn’t even know Him. We’d better put that on the wire.” You know how we know that? We know that because Peter told those who then wrote it down. He told the tale on himself. He was the witness to what he had done. And he knew that rather than covering it up, it would be a far more powerful witness to the One who had saved him from his sin and completely transformed his life, to admit what he had done and to say, “I’m not the plaster saint you might think I am. I’m not the perfect role model. I’m not the guy you should emulate, at least not in all things. I’m the guy who stands right next to you and gets what I don’t deserve, just like you.”

So they’re witnesses. And after having been told their part in God’s plan, they were told in verse 49 to go run right out and start telling everybody exactly what had happened and to make plans and strategize and start raising money, because we all know that’s the most important part of the plan, and then go into all the world. That’s exactly what they did. Isn’t it? Did I read that wrong? I did? You’re right. Verse 49: “I’m going to send you what My Father has promised, but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” Isn’t that kind of weird? Jesus has just told them they have the most

important thing to do in the history of the world and now they're supposed to hurry up and wait. Hurry up and wait. It's true, they only had to wait for ten days, but I can imagine that ten days must have seemed like an eternity. They must have been just so full of energy and so full of desire to go out and to do what they knew they were supposed to do. It must have just filled them to bursting. And what would have happened if they would have done that. PFFFFFFFFTTTTTT! Nothing. If they had done that right then, if they, like little kids told that something good is going to happen but they should wait because not all the preparations had been made and you need to hold on, and what do those kids do? They run out the door because they want it to happen right now. If they had done that, they'd have fallen flat on their faces. Because they are just like us. They might have thought that they knew what they needed to do. They might have read all the right books, they might have listened to all the right megachurch pastors, they might have gotten together every bit of wisdom they could possibly find and put together an in-depth strategy that ran 16 pages and confused the daylights out of everyone but they thought it was brilliant. And all they would have had would have been a lot of wasted effort and time and a really in-depth expression of arrogance. Because the mission they had been given wasn't about them. It wasn't about their plans, it wasn't about their visions or their goals, it wasn't about what they thought was good.

If anyone were to ask me what I thought would be the best thing that could happen right now in the next five minutes, it would be for God to appear here in unmistakable form and to reveal Himself not just to us but to every human being on the planet so unquestionably that no one could do anything but fall down and worship and believe. That's what I think God should do. It would be easier. It would be quicker. It wouldn't let us get in the way and mess things up. God should get right on that. And they may have had some more thoughts. But what Jesus is telling them is, "You're not ready yet. You don't have what you need, because what you need doesn't come from inside your skull or even from that big heart of yours. It comes from God. It comes in the form of the Holy Spirit living in you, speaking to you, guiding you, protecting you, empowering you, enabling you to do not what you think is a wonderful thing to do, but enabling you to carry out the plans of God." If they were going to be fruitful and faithful, they were to wait.

The passage concludes in Bethany. Quickly, this is what verses 50-53 have to say. Jesus' last words on the far side of the Mount of Olives: "When He led them out to the vicinity of Bethany He lifted up His hands and blessed them." Aw, that's nice. He blessed them. This is not a spiritual pat on the head. The word "blessing" is not, "I think some good things should happen to you." A blessing is a way of saying "God be with you." So this was the functional equivalent of what He is recorded as saying in Matthew 28 which is that He would be with them always. When He brought them out to Bethany and blessed them it was His way of saying no matter where you go, no matter what you encounter, no matter what you are told to do, I will be with you. I will have gone ahead of you to prepare the ground. I will be with you at every step of the way. And even after you leave I will still be there."

And then while He was blessing them, while He was giving them this great promise, He left them and He was taken up into heaven and there was weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth because, “Oh, we can’t do it without Him. He was not supposed to go. He was supposed to stay with us.” But the thing is, He just promised He would. “I will be with you always,” even as He floated away into heaven. Of course, these guys could be dense at times, we all know that. We’ve read the whole story. We know sometimes He didn’t get through to them, but He had just gotten through to them saying, “I’ve got something for you. I have the Holy Spirit for you. He will be given to you shortly.”

And so it is that in verses 52 and 53, having seen Him depart from them they worshiped Him. They returned to Jerusalem with great joy and they stayed continually at the Temple, not weeping, not mourning, but praising God for what He had done, for what He had promised, for what He was doing even then in them and through them and for all that He would do in them and through them, not just that day, but every day of their lives, and as He has done in His church for two thousand years and as He will continue to do in each of you in Faith Church, in His church catholic throughout the world, every day from now until He returns. Thanks be to God for His inexpressible gift.