

Historic Commentary

(Ascension Sunday - Year B)



The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on Luke 24:44-53 from Selected Church Fathers

[Thomas Aquinas' curated commentary on Luke 24](#), from a 13th century document called the [Catena Aurea](#) that contains compiled verse by verse commentary on the Gospels from the Patristics and others.

[Cyril of Alexandria](#): When he restrained their thoughts by what he said, by the touch of their hands and by sharing food, he then opened their minds to understand that he had to suffer, even on the wood of the cross. The Lord reminds the disciples of what he said. He had forewarned them of his sufferings on the cross, according to what the prophets had long before spoken. He also opens the eyes of their hearts for them to understand the ancient prophecies.

[Venerable Bede](#): When he was about to ascend into heaven, our Lord first took care to instruct his disciples diligently concerning the mystery of faith in him. They might therefore preach it with greater certainty to the world, because they had received it from the mouth of Truth himself and recognized that the words of the prophets had long ago foreshadowed it. He appeared to them after the triumph of his resurrection, according to what we heard just now when the Gospel was read. He said, "These are the words which I spoke to you when I was still with you." That means, "When I still had a corruptible and mortal body like yours." "Everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled." He said that he fulfilled the mysteries which Moses, the prophets and the psalms proclaimed. It is perfectly evident that the church is one in all its saints and that the faith of all the chosen is the same, of those who preceded and who followed his coming in the flesh. We are saved through faith in his incarnation, passion and resurrection that have been accomplished.

[Augustine](#): What did he tell them from the Scriptures? He said, "Repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem." The disciples could not see this. They could see Christ talking about the church that would be. When Christ said something they could not see, they believed him. They could see the head, but they could not yet see the body. We can see the body, but we believe about the head. They are two: husband and wife, head and body, Christ and the church. He showed himself to the disciples and promised them the church. He showed us the church and ordered us to believe about himself. The apostles saw one thing, but they did not see the other. We also see one thing and do not see the other. Having the

head there with them, they believed about the body. Having the body here with us, we should believe about the head.

Augustine: The Lord did not only shed his blood, but he also applied his death to the preparation of the cure. He rose again to present us with a sample of resurrection. He suffered with patience all his own to teach us the patience we should have. In his resurrection, he showed us the reward of patience. As you know and we all confess, he ascended into heaven, and then he sent the Holy Spirit as he had previously promised. You remember that he said to his disciples, “Stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.” His promise came true. The Holy Spirit came, he filled the disciples, and they started speaking with the tongues of all nations. A sign of unity was enacted in them. One person spoke then in all languages, because the unity of the church was going to speak in all languages.

Venerable Bede: The preaching of repentance and the forgiveness of sins through confession of Christ’s name appropriately started from Jerusalem. The first root of faith in him would be brought out where the splendor of his teaching and virtues, the triumph of his passion, the joy of his resurrection and ascension were accomplished. The first shoot of the blooming church, like some kind of great vine, would be planted. By an increase in the spreading of the Word, the church would extend the branches of its teaching into the whole wide world. The prophecy of Isaiah would be brought to fulfillment. He said, “The law will go forth from Zion and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem, and he will judge the nations and convict many peoples.” It was appropriate that the preaching of repentance and the forgiveness of sins, good news to be proclaimed to idolatrous nations and those defiled by various evil deeds, should start from Jerusalem. Perhaps some of the nations, thoroughly terrified by the magnitude of Jerusalem’s offenses, might doubt the possibility of obtaining pardon if it performed fruits worthy of repentance.⁸ He granted pardon even to those at Jerusalem who had blasphemed and crucified the Son of God

Cyril of Alexandria: The Savior promises the disciples the descent of the Holy Spirit, which God announced of old by Joel. He also promises power from above, so that they might be strong, invincible and fearlessly preach the divine mystery to people everywhere. He says to them that they received the Spirit after the resurrection, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” He adds, “Wait for the promise of the Father, which you heard from me, for John baptized with water, but before many days you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” It will not be in water any longer, because they already had received that, but it will be with the Holy Spirit. He does not add water to water but completes that which was deficient by adding what it lacked.

Augustine: There is still more for you to hear. He ascends into heaven, accompanied by the eyes of the disciples gazing after him. He lets them observe it, and he makes them witnesses.... They certainly saw, touched and felt him. They confirmed their faith by looking at him and touching him. They accompanied him with their gaze as he ascended into heaven. With attentive ears, they heard the angel’s voice assuring them and foretelling that Christ would come again.

All these things were completed for them. Neither sight alone nor handling of the Lord's limbs was still enough to ensure that they would become witnesses of Christ and bravely endure everything for the preaching of the truth, fighting against falsehood even to the shedding of their blood. Who gave them such a capability? Listen to the Lord himself. "Stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high." "You have seen and touched, but you are still not able to preach and die for what you have seen and touched, until you are clothed with power from on high. Let human beings go now and attribute it to their own powers, if they can do anything. There was Peter, and he had not yet been confirmed in the rock. He had not yet been clothed with power from on high, because "nobody can receive anything, unless it has been given him from heaven."

Venerable Bede: "Then he led them out to Bethany, and lifting up his hands, he blessed them." Our Redeemer appeared in the flesh to take away sins, remove what humans deserved because of the first curse, and grant believers an inheritance of everlasting blessing. He rightly concluded all that he did in the world with words of blessing. He showed that he was the very one of whom it was said, "For indeed he who gave the law will give a blessing." It is appropriate that he led those whom he blessed out to Bethany, which is interpreted "house of obedience." Contempt and pride deserved a curse, but obedience deserved a blessing. The Lord himself was made obedient to his Father even unto death, so that he might restore the lost grace of blessing to the world. He gives the blessing of heavenly life only to those who strive in the holy church to comply with the divine commands

Cyril of Alexandria: Having blessed them and gone ahead a little, he was carried up into heaven so that he might share the Father's throne even with the flesh that was united to him. The Word made this new pathway for us when he appeared in human form. After this, and in due time, he will come again in the glory of his Father with the angels and will take us up to be with him. Let us glorify him. Being God the Word, he became man for our sakes. He suffered willingly in the flesh, rose from the dead and abolished corruption. He was taken up, and he will come with great glory to judge the living and the dead, to give to every one according to his deeds.

Augustine: You heard what came to our ears just now from the Gospel: "Lifting up his hands, he blessed them. And it happened, while he was blessing them he withdrew from them, and was carried up to heaven." Who was carried up to heaven? The Lord Christ was. Who is the Lord Christ? He is the Lord Jesus. What is this? Are you going to separate the human from the divine and make one person of God, another of the man, so that there is no longer a trinity of three but a quaternary of four? Just as you, a human being, are soul and body, so the Lord Christ is Word, soul and body. The Word did not depart from the Father. He both came to us and did not forsake the Father. He both took flesh in the womb and continued to govern the universe. What was lifted up into heaven, if not what had been taken from earth? That is to say, the very flesh, the very body, about which he was speaking when he said to the disciples, "Feel, and see that a spirit does not have bones and flesh, as you can see that I have." Let us believe this, brothers and sisters, and if we have difficulty in meeting the arguments of the philosophers, let us hold on to what was demonstrated in the Lord's case without any difficulty of faith. Let them chatter, but

let us believe.

Leo the Great: Dearly beloved, through all this time between the resurrection of the Lord and his ascension, the providence of God thought of this, taught this and penetrated their eyes and heart. He wanted them to recognize the Lord Jesus Christ as truly risen, who was truly born, truly suffered and truly died. The manifest truth strengthened the blessed apostles and all the disciples who were frightened by his death on the cross and were doubtful of his resurrection. The result was they were not only afflicted with sadness but also were filled with “great joy” when the Lord went into the heights of heaven.

It was certainly a great and indescribable source of joy when, in the sight of the heavenly multitudes, the nature of our human race ascended over the dignity of all heavenly creatures. It passed the angelic orders and was raised beyond the heights of archangels. In its ascension, our human race did not stop at any other height until this same nature was received at the seat of the eternal Father. Our human nature, united with the divinity of the Son, was on the throne of his glory.

The ascension of Christ is our elevation. Hope for the body is also invited where the glory of the Head preceded us. Let us exult, dearly beloved, with worthy joy and be glad with a holy thanksgiving. Today we not only are established as possessors of paradise, but we have even penetrated the heights of the heavens in Christ. The indescribable grace of Christ, which we lost through the “ill will of the devil,” prepared us more fully for that glory. Incorporated within himself, the Son of God placed those whom the violent enemy threw down from the happiness of our first dwelling at the right hand of the Father. The Son of God lives and reigns with God the Father almighty and with the Holy Spirit forever and ever

Augustine: He ascended on the fortieth day. Here we are today when everyone present is filled with the Holy Spirit as he comes upon him or her, and they speak with the tongues of all nations. He commends unity to us through the tongues of all nations. The Lord commends unity as he rises again. Christ commends it as he ascends. The Holy Spirit confirms it when he comes today.