

## The Next Chapter - Ascension 2024

I'm sure there are some people you know who get a new book and immediately look at the ending - to see if they think they're going to like it. I have never quite understood that, as it seems to me that pretty often the denouement of the plot is on the last few pages. Certainly, if you were to read an Agatha Christie detective novel, you would find that Hercule Poirot had assembled all the suspects in the drawing room, and be telling them that he was about to unmask the killer - and that would have spoiled the whole book for you.

But in Luke chapter 24, we have almost an entire synopsis of the story of Jesus, from his

empty tomb and Resurrection, the explanation of how he got there and why, his appearances before his disciples and others, his proof that he was a physically real person after his resurrection, his promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit to enable the disciples in their ministry, to his ascension into heaven, and the joyous return of the disciples to Jerusalem.

Pretty much the whole gospel story in 53 verses.

So if you turned to the last page, you would find out that all was well in the end, and then might assume that because there was a happy

ending, the rest of the book wasn't worth reading. Big mistake.

Just as reading the whole of a detective novel is essential, to see if you can pick up the clues that are there, and get the answer before the ace detective, so with the gospels, to leave out the meat is to miss all the pearls that come from Jesus' ministry. Rather like being dropped into the centre of a maze and being told to find your way out.

There are similar tests in musical theory - only backwards - and only at the top level; you will be given the music to the beginning of a tune (which is unknown), and usually only of one clef or voice, and then asked to complete the

music, ending in a different key, having modulated through (probably) the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth of the scale in the process. Of course, you can only do this if you have now turned it into four part harmony in order to demonstrate the modular progressions.

Perhaps a simpler analogy would be to give you a pile of jigsaw puzzle pieces, but without any end picture, and ask you to construct what it should be.

I use this example because I know there are some jigsaw puzzlers in our congregation. I wonder how they'd get on with just a box of pieces and no final picture to aim for.

In my convoluted mind, that is how I see the disciples after Jesus leaves them at his ascension.

Before I discuss this, I want to say that I have no intention of getting embroiled in the minutiae of what actually happened at the ascension. We will never know, and the disciples clearly didn't understand it. Reference is only made in Luke's gospel and Acts, which was also written by Luke. Matthew, Mark, and John make no reference to it at all.

When I was doing Royal Marine training, we would be given various tasks to test our ability to think quickly and deal with problems.

When out on one such exercise - which usually went with sleep and food deprivation, just to sharpen you up, you understand - we were faced with a river that was flowing quite quickly and was too deep to ford. Our task was to get the entire team of eight over the river with our equipment, and for this we were given piece of rope. That's all. The river was about 25 feet wide - too far to jump or throw our equipment over.

We were expected to arrive dry on the other side, with our equipment in the same condition, and then make our way to the nearest pub - for which we had been given a grid reference, where the Training Staff promised they would buy us each a pint if we succeeded.

This was a test of leadership as much as anything, as each of us had different skills. This was not one of those times to put my ability to write four-part harmony into practice.

Let's just say that we made it - though there were one or two wet feet - we all got across, as did our kit.

Once in the pub, we were dismayed to find that we were largely unable to drink the place dry on the Training Staff's budget, because we had eaten virtually nothing for about 5 days, and half a pint of beer not only went straight to our heads, but also filled our shrunken stomachs, so that we didn't want any more. The Training Staff weren't stupid - they'd

seen this phenomenon before, and were laughing their heads off at us.

I believe that this scenario is much the same as the way Jesus leaves the disciples.

They have been given all the tools, they have been trained in all the techniques, he has prepared them for this moment, and now - at his moment of departure, he hands them a piece of rope in the form of the promised Holy Spirit, and says, 'Now it's all up to you. You've had the training, you are all capable - now get out there and do it!'

If I was to train someone to write music, or be able to perform operations, and they reached

a very high standard, such that they would be able to teach others - what would be the point, if they never wrote a note or even cut out a simple sebaceous cyst?

Wouldn't you think that was a complete waste of time and effort? Certainly, I would - as the teacher - and if it was you who was itching just to learn how to write counterpoint or perform a cholecystectomy - wouldn't you be pretty miffed if this expert refused to show you his or her skill?

I think you might.

In such a way, this makes the importance of the ascension even more relevant, as this is the point in the disciples lives that they either

embrace their ministry, or go back to the farm and raise chickens.

I called the disciples a bunch of misfits last week, and I repeat it today. What on earth prompted Jesus to select such a bizarre collection of men?

But he got it right! Every one of his chosen disciples came up with the goods; even Judas Iscariot had a prophesy to fulfill - that cost him his life. He may not have been a martyr in the conventional sense - but even Jesus recognized Judas' role in fulfilling prophecy from Psalm 41:9, 'Even my close friend, someone I trusted, one who shared my bread, has turned against me.'

Every other disciple - or I should say, every other of Jesus' 12 chosen apostles - was martyred for their role in trying to spread the word of the kingdom of God and the grace we receive in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Except for John, who needed to stay alive to receive his revelation on the island of Patmos, and give us the last book in the bible.

There are so many times in our lives that we are sent out to do a job, and we don't feel really prepared - 'I'm just not ready!' But we get sent all the same.

And this idea plays into our other theme of this morning, which is of Mothers' Day.

How often, I wonder, did your mother send you off somewhere to do something when you felt you really weren't ready yet?

First day at school; first date; packing up for university or going to your first job; getting a serious girlfriend or boyfriend; getting married; you can make supper; driving solo...

You can fill in the blanks.

I also realize that not everyone had the same experience of their mother as I did - so it would be invidious of me to suggest that all your experiences were of the positive kind - but I can only hope they were.

Some of you may not even have known your mother - or your birth mother, because you were adopted.

But this day it is an opportunity to celebrate Mothers in the generic sense, for providing us with life and support - and, hopefully, love.

There are a couple of songs I have chosen to play into that theme later in the service.

So, just as Jesus had trained and commissioned his disciples - so our mothers have trained and commissioned us - to go out into the world and be the best that we can be - to honour them. That means using the talents that have been nurtured in us, and

using the gifts we are given to help us along the way.

Not to use that piece of rope to help yourself and others over the river is to miss your role in life. If you don't use it - you don't deserve it.

Remember what Jesus said, 'You did not choose me; I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit.'

Right then - go and bear fruit! Or you're wasting your life and making a mockery of Jesus calling you and giving you this job to do.

Use the rope - get over the river - and work for Christ's sake!