



# Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

MAY 28, 2017  
ASCENSION SUNDAY

Lucky Jesus  
Luke 24:44-53; Acts 1:1-11

Most of us went to bed on Monday night with images of young girls and their parents running frantically out of the Manchester Arena in England. A twenty-two year old suicide bomber had chosen an Ariana Grande concert, which attracts the youngest of music enthusiasts, as the ideal venue to deliver death and suffering. Yesterday morning, we awoke to the news that a busload of Coptic Christians was ambushed on a lonely road leading to a monastery where they expected to spend the day, we would assume, in prayer and reflection. The reports are that twenty-nine people, including two small children, were killed in that attack.

The carnage seems to go on and on all around the world and there appears to be no way to completely stop the people who want to hurt others in an effort to promote their own ideologies or, perhaps, to salve their own pain and misery. One concertgoer in Manchester who captured on video the chaos following the explosion can be heard repeating one question over and over: “What is going on? What is going on?”<sup>1</sup>

This morning we have heard two versions of an admittedly strange story. If Jesus’ appearance in the garden, healed and whole again after his crucifixion, wasn’t difficult enough to understand, certainly a story in which Jesus suddenly rises into the clouds is more challenging still. Yet, at the conclusion of his first book and the beginning of his next, Luke tells us about Jesus’ final moments on earth and his rather dramatic and mysterious ascent to heaven. Although the circumstances are vastly different, I find myself, like the frightened girl in Manchester, asking over and over, “What is going on? What is going on?”

I love that beautiful anthem the choir often sings on Ash Wednesday or Maundy Thursday and which we heard a few weeks ago titled “Stay With Us.”

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<sup>1</sup>Ed Caesar, “A Terrorist Attack in Manchester,” *The New Yorker* (May 23, 2017); accessed online at: [http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/a-terrorist-attack-in-manchester?mbid=nl\\_170523\\_Daily&CNID=36959856&spMailingID=11093064&spUserID=MTMzMTgzODAwNTk1S0&spJobID=1162008776&spReportId=MTE2MjAwODc3NgS2](http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/a-terrorist-attack-in-manchester?mbid=nl_170523_Daily&CNID=36959856&spMailingID=11093064&spUserID=MTMzMTgzODAwNTk1S0&spJobID=1162008776&spReportId=MTE2MjAwODc3NgS2).

The song is actually set in the context of Easter evening as two of the disciples are returning to their home in Emmaus after being in Jerusalem all weekend following Jesus' crucifixion. They meet a stranger on the road who, unknown to them, happens to be Jesus. He explains his life in the context of the fulfillment of scripture and, when they reach Emmaus, acts as if he is going to continue on to the next town. The text of the anthem is the two disciples' invitation to Jesus, "Stay with us, Lord Jesus, stay with us, it soon is evening, and night is falling."<sup>2</sup> Theirs was an hospitable invitation, a courtesy, what they had been taught to say to strangers and people who were journeying along. "Stay with us. It is late and dangerous on the road." These two naive disciples were simply inviting Jesus to stay for supper and offering a safe bed for the night.

When I hear those words, however, and repeat them in my heart, it is not as a polite invitation, the kind of hospitality the Bible and our parents teach us. No, when I say to Jesus, "Stay with us!" I am asking for his protection. I am begging him to be vigilant for us. "Stay with us and take care of us!" I beg.

When I think of Jesus rising into the sky from the hills around Jerusalem, I want to shout, "Stay with us, Jesus! We need you more than heaven does! Stay with us because things are dark and scary here on earth. Stay with us and bring us peace!" And I don't think I would be alone in that chant.

Luke tells us that the disciples stood there in amazement, watching Jesus drift away and then worshiped him and went with joy to the temple to pray. Yet, I wonder how many of them were saying in their hearts, "What is going on? Stay with us! We need you here!"

Lucky Jesus! I can't really blame him for wanting to get the heck out of Dodge. After all, his sojourn on earth had not exactly been a cakewalk. As a baby he had been hunted by Herod's henchmen and perhaps hundreds of baby boys like himself were killed in an effort to get rid of him. He and his family fled as refugees to Egypt, a place that had once enslaved his people. At the height of his ministry, he was arrested on bogus charges, tortured, and crucified. After what he had experienced, I would have caught the next cloud to heaven as well. Did not one of the psalmists pray, "O that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest; truly, I would flee far away" (Psalm 55:6-7a). Lucky Jesus. I certainly cannot blame him for wanting to get away

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<sup>2</sup>Egil Hovland, "Stay With Us," from *Captive and Free*, Augsburg Fortress Publishing, 1999.

to a safer, more peaceful place, but we needed him here. Was it for escape or necessity that Jesus ascended into heaven?

To answer that question, we have to look at the rest of the story. Keep in mind that Jesus' first opportunity to "escape" was on the cross. Our faith teaches us that when our spirit leaves our body, we are immediately welcomed into the loving arms of God. Jesus himself bore witness to this fact when he cried out, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit!" (Luke 23:46). By all accounts, Jesus had done what he had come to do: teach us the true ways of God, offer us a glimpse of who God truly is, and demonstrate how the life of faith is to be lived. Yet, there was one more thing Jesus needed to do, and for that he had to return. Ultimately, God in Christ had come to earth so that we might have life, full and complete (John 10:10). So Jesus made, what for me is the greatest sacrifice. After all that had happened, after struggling to teach his followers about God's true nature, after battling the religious leaders who were afraid of losing, not their faith, but their privilege, and after suffering physical, mental, and emotional torture ending in death, Jesus came back. He came back to offer us his ultimate gift of life. In the garden, a prime symbol of the resilience of life, Jesus came back to our life and offered us life eternal.

That is the back story that brings us to the hill outside Bethany and his return to heaven. Stay with us, Jesus. Stay with us because it is getting dark here and we are afraid. Rome will not tolerate a resurrected Messiah or those who follow him. The world will not remember what you said and did. Stay with us! And he does!

He does stay! Granted, Luke tells us that a cloud surrounded him and whisked him away to heaven so that he has never been seen again in bodily form, but that is not the end of the story. Next week we will celebrate the end of the great Fifty Days when God in Christ returned as the Holy Spirit, fired up to breathe energy and excitement into his people and spread the Gospel throughout the world. What is going on? It is the Spirit of God in Christ working in you and me and every other believer to do God's work in the world. That is why Jesus had to continue on his way. That is why he could not remain and dwell with us. We had to know him in the breaking of bread, the sharing of the cup, and the continuation of his ministry to the world.

We still ask that question, "What is going on?", don't we? We want to know what the world is coming to when people cannot attend a concert or visit a monastery or run a race or go to school or shop in a store or live out their

calling in the world without being killed for it. What is going on? Stay with us and help us, dear God!

And he has! God in Christ has not abandoned us; rather, by returning to the heavenly realm, Jesus empowered us to fulfill our calling as his followers. We are the ones called by God to live in peace and harmony with one another. We are the ones who are called to seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8). We are to be the hands, the feet, and the voices of God in the world.

And we are. Without hesitation, once the bomb went off in the Manchester Arena, people helped one another. Some people helped guide concertgoers out to safety. It was reported that Ariane Grande's mother moved a number of young girls to safety backstage. Regular folks like you and me rushed to take care of people who were wounded. Two homeless men, men with whom you and I likely would not make eye contact on the street, sprang into action. The *New York Times* reported that

Mr. Parker, 33, was panhandling when the bomb exploded . . . The force of the blast knocked him to the floor, but he was unfazed. Rather than running for safety, he went to the aid of victims, comforting a girl who had lost her legs, wrapping her in a T-shirt, and cradling a dying woman in his arms. Mr. Jones, 35, says he pulled nails out of children's arms and faces. "Just because I am homeless doesn't mean I haven't got a heart, or I'm not human still," he told ITV News. "I'd like to think someone would come and help me if I needed the help," he said, adding that he had been overcome by an "instinct" to pitch in.<sup>3</sup>

Immediately, scores of British police officers and rescue workers arrived on the scene to offer help. But keep in mind that law enforcement was already on the scene before the concert. Men and women patrol England's cities day and night to keep them safe. Military and intelligence officials work tirelessly to thwart such attacks and are quite successful much of the time. The truth is that when tragedy strikes, we help. You may have seen the video of two young men who noticed a condominium building on fire in Raleigh last Friday. Without hesitation, they went to every door in the building, kicking open some of them, to be certain everyone got out alive. Today, people are

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<sup>3</sup>Dan Bilefsky, "They Went to Manchester Arena as Homeless Men. They Left as Heroes." *The New York Times* (May 24, 2017), accessed online at: [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/24/world/europe/homeless-hero-manchester.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/24/world/europe/homeless-hero-manchester.html?_r=0).

working to help families who lost their homes in Autreyville last week to a tornado and other people are working halfway around the world to assist survivors of the flooding and landslides in Sri Lanka. And let us not forget the two young men in Portland, Oregon who gave their lives protecting two young women from a man filled with hatred and violence.

This weekend we honor women and men who gave their lives fighting for peace in the world. We do not honor them because we think that military might should rule the world. We do not remember them because the world is better without them here. We do not hold sacred their memory because we believe that warfare is the only way to solve the problems of the world. We honor the people who died in service to our country because they realized that something had to be done to protect our world, and they were willing to give their lives, if necessary, so that the rest of us might live in freedom.

Jesus offered us life—abundant life—full and complete life. That offer is for all people. Our calling is to extend that offer to every child, woman, and man in the world. How we do it is up to us and the gifts God has given us. Some of us do it by being good parents and children. Some of us share the Good News by teaching or running an honest business or working an honest job. Some of us spread the Gospel by helping people who are having a tough time, believing in people who no longer believe in themselves. Some of us help govern our communities or states or nations. Some of us work hard to make certain our government remains honest and good. Some of us volunteer at the Down East Radio Reading Service so that people who are blind can be informed and use their other abilities to foster life in the world. All of us can make a difference by being a kind and compassionate neighbor to the people around us.

We want a better world and we work for it. That is what Jesus left us to do and why God in Christ returned in the Holy Spirit to help us do it. Lucky Jesus! He has us to carry on his work in the world!

What is going on? God in Christ is alive and well and active through people like you and me who long to have a world which knows freedom and peace. God in Christ stays with us through the Spirit which empowers us. What is going on? Life! Life is going on, not the death which some people want to peddle, but life that is vibrant and enriched. Death and destruction will not win because life always does. Thanks be to God for the life he offers to us and through us by the grace of Jesus Christ our risen and ascended Savior. Amen.

May 28, 2017

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

O God who is the giver of every good and perfect gift, on this day we have set aside to celebrate our freedom and to remember the men and women who have given their lives to secure it, we thank you, O Lord, for these moments of quiet contemplation when we can slow our pace enough to be mindful of the liberties we enjoy. Help us to recognize that freedom is a great gift and a right which carries with it tremendous responsibility. May we cherish our own freedom, even as we seek to secure it for people throughout the world and to defend it for future generations. May we know the assurance that our liberty is not only that we might speak and worship as we see fit, but also freedom from the bondage of sin and liberty to serve you and others.

Merciful God, even as our hearts fill with gratitude because of the blessings of life and liberty which are ours, our hearts break because of the overwhelming needs in our world. Today we are especially mindful of those as far away as Great Britain and Egypt, and as close as College Park, Maryland, and Portland, Oregon, who have suffered because of hate and violence. We pray for healing for the injured, comfort for those who are grieving, and peace in these and all lands that are torn apart by fear and division. Too many of our brothers and sisters in the human family suffer persecution because of religious or political convictions. Grant us courage to work for their freedom, knowing that none are truly free until all are free. Too many around the world suffer because of hunger, disease, or violence. Give us hearts of compassion and spirits of peace that the needs of others might move us to respond. Too many in our own community feel the pain of loneliness, poverty, or injustice. O Lord, so fill us with your generosity and hospitality that they cannot help but overflow from our lives, that our actions, words, and attitudes may bring healing and reconciliation. Hear our prayer, O God of all the nations, a prayer for peace, a prayer for wisdom, a prayer for mercy, through Jesus Christ our Lord and by the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen.

Elizabeth J. Edwards  
Associate Minister