

## Kingdom Geography

### Psalm 68:1-10, Acts 1:1-14

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It had been forty glorious, mysterious days since the report from the tomb that it was indeed empty. Many had actually seen Jesus, who was crucified and now, beyond belief, HE WAS ALIVE. Forty days of resurrection experiences. Yet these experiences were so unpredictable, Jesus would just appear in the midst of life, explain some things, open their eyes...and often when they finally realized “hey, we know him” he would vanish. Unpredictable, ungraspable, this resurrected Jesus. Forty days of post-grad work: the years of walking in the dust of Rabbi Jesus are now coming into focus as resurrected Christ stood in their midst and explained the Kingdom. Things were becoming more and more clear. Luke describes it this way at the ending of his gospel:

<sup>45</sup>Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, <sup>46</sup>and he said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, <sup>47</sup>and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. <sup>48</sup>You are witnesses of these things. <sup>49</sup>And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.’

<sup>50</sup> Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. <sup>51</sup>While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. <sup>52</sup>And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; <sup>53</sup>and they were continually in the temple blessing God.<sup>1</sup>

One leaves *that* ending with bated breath. It was the original cliffhanger: we wonder what is this power promise, how will it come? What will come next after Jesus goes? So much had been accomplished, but what would be next? What does it look like for this power to come? For the nations to know?

Luke, in the sequel we call Acts, says that this record in Gospel of Luke was just the beginning of Jesus’ work and activity, i.e. there was more to come.

On this day of post-resurrection class, the 40<sup>th</sup> day, Jesus leads them on a little field trip to the Mt. of Olivet, close to Bethany for a lesson on Kingdom Geography. As the disciples walked with him, surely they were reminded of one of the last times they walked that road, the triumphal trek Jesus took on a colt, Hosannas ringing out, a sign--they had thought at the time--that Jesus was indeed Messiah who would rescue and restore Israel. Things had spiraled the last time: but now with crucifixion behind them and resurrection right before them, perhaps this was a new day. So, on-site at Mt. Olivet, they ask Jesus the question, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” It’s not a foolish question: in fact, if you spend much

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 24:45-53, New Revised Standard Version

time with it, it makes sense. After all, this is where the triumphal journey had begun AND Jesus had conquered death: this guy could do ANYTHING. AND he had spent the past 40 days speaking about THE Kingdom. All things seemed to point to what the prophets of old spoke of: the restoration of God's people, Israel at long last. Freedom from oppression must be close. SURELY—it was long past time!

Jesus is not harsh with them. I imagine he put his hand on the nearest disciple's shoulder, looked them in the eyes and said, "It is not for you to know the timing, Father has his own timing, set by his own authority." They wanted the kingdom restored to Israel, NOW. But, Jesus redirects them, redirects their obsession with the timing of things and sets their sights on something totally different...

They had asked, "Lord, is this the time when YOU will restore the kingdom to Israel?"

Jesus' responds: "But YOU will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon YOU; and YOU will be my witnesses..." The tables are turned. It was a seismic shift. I MEAN, this is resurrected Christ speaking: raising from the dead ain't no small thing! He, obviously, is the one with the power, with the ability. Wouldn't—shouldn't—he be the one to be doing all this?

But, God's plan is totally different: it was not about when; it was NOT Jesus, as the disciples knew him, who will be the one at work here on earth: it is YOU, the disciples, in the power of Holy Spirit. Holy Spirit is promised to bring power to them—not power in the sense of authority, but in the sense of the energy for the kingdom work. And friends, this is no command: it is a statement of fact—"you will be my witnesses". They had seen with their own eyes the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ: they had seen proof--the scars, seen the man eat, walked with him, and been with him for 40 days. They had seen and experienced resurrection of Christ to the fullest. This experience compounded with Holy Spirit meant that they would indeed, with out a doubt, be the ones who will tell the story, who step up to testify to the death and resurrection of Christ enabling repentance and forgiveness for all. You, you, followers of Christ, will be the ones with the power through Holy Spirit, who will speak about these remarkable things and will give to others this good news of salvation. This is the kingdom plan, friends. The plan is to hand it over: from Jesus to the followers of Jesus.

*"Will you now restore the kingdom to Israel?"* They had wondered: their understanding of kingdom geography being limited to one people group. Jesus' geographical comprehension varied just a bit from theirs: he had in mind not just Israel, but let's throw in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and what the heck, how about even to the ends of the earth! Much more than the disciples ever dreamed: the kingdom leaves the boundaries of Israel. In fact it includes not only the familiar: Jerusalem, the place that is most holy of places (where also religiosity blossomed); the area of Judea—a place known and traveled by the disciples, with people who followed the law of Moses, the people one might call "my kind of people"; but also Samaria—which they tried to avoid at all cost, with the people they didn't like, who got religion mostly wrong—the half-breeds, and the ends of the earth: the Gentiles, the heathens! AND that pretty much covers it. The story of repentance and forgiveness, of incredible love, sacrifice, life: the salvation, the home, the shelter, the welcoming arms of our God—is for ALL people—No matter what. Jesus

blew the concept of the kingdom out of the water. This plan is not to restore the kingdom to Israel—not inward focus—but rather to bring the kingdom to all peoples of the earth and invite them in. It was a kingdom with no population limits or boundaries.

And before there is chance for rebuttal, before a disciple could get a question in, right there before their eyes, Jesus starts to take off into heaven. And a cloud welcomes him in. Luke doesn't put this in to create a pretty picture: it wasn't that the morning papyrus news reported that this 40<sup>th</sup> day of resurrection could expect partly cloudy skies, particularly hanging over Mt. Olivet. Remember how at Mt. Sinai, the presence of God was described as a cloud, how God led the people of Israel through the wilderness: a cloud by day, fire by night, and, more recently Peter, James and John would remember the Mt. of Transfiguration, when as Peter was planning the tent situation for Jesus, Moses and Elijah "a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!". It was not partly cloudy that day: Father God was present. Jesus was taken into the presence of God.

What a sight! Man, it is enough to make one (after gaping a bit, rubbing the eyes, and gaping some more) want to fall on the knees and have a bona fide praise service! Before Peter could pop off some grandiose idea of setting up tents, or ask to also take flight as he had done with walking on water, suddenly two men in white clothing are in their midst, and like a curious two year olds, tugging their sleeves, totally interrupting the moment asking "Men of Galilee, What'cha lookin' at?" As their Lord, the one they follow goes up to heaven; the men pull their attention to earth calling them "men of Galilee" as if to remind them, that they are indeed people who are to remain on earth. "Come in, people of earth." Those guys in white are always asking the most incredulous questions: at the tomb they asked, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" Why do they ask these things? At the ascension, if I had been a disciple, I'm afraid I would have gaped at them in disbelief. I mean, did they not just see that: up, up he went, presence of God—this is BIG! AWESOME! INCREDIBLE! Why do you think I'm looking up there?

The men in white follow the question with a hope-filled promise, he will come back the same way. Well, if they were trying to get me to get my head out of the clouds, they could have come up with something better than that! But just as resurrected Christ, moved seamlessly in and out of their midst, un-graspable, now Christ was far beyond their grasp: he left. But his leaving did not complete the task on this earth. No, the men in white were calling the disciples to get their heads out of the clouds: the incredible thing here is not the way Jesus left, but what lies ahead: the kingdom work of witnessing through Holy Spirit energy. Why do you look up there? Look around you, soon the Spirit of Christ, will set about continuing Jesus' work here, through you, thru your hands, and feet, and mouths and lives. You are still people of earth. But rest assured, this isn't goodbye, Christ will come again.

Though the geography of location changed, the presence of Christ is still at work in the Holy Spirit and in the witnesses of His life, death and resurrection. Yet, it's a case of "hurry up and wait" if I ever saw one! The disciples have to wait for this power to come with Holy Spirit. But, being around resurrected Christ, hearing teaching on the Kingdom, and witnessing the ascension did something for the disciples: they finally got it. Cause, they headed back to

Jerusalem to do what Jesus had commanded: to wait. And they prayed, and they praised God. And they waited. Do we not still know that tension? The tension of the promise of God's movement, and yet we must wait for God's timing. Shall we take note of the disciples, who spent that time of waiting in prayer and praise?

At the end of that day, the 40<sup>th</sup> day—a day filled with the lesson on kingdom geography—the world had been rearranged. Jesus' location changed: from being present physically, to being in heaven, yet present in new way through the Holy Spirit to come. The Kingdom is to be for all peoples—an outward-focused kingdom: a kingdom grounded on this earth, rather than in the clouds. And the kingdom work is handed into the hands of eleven apostles, some women, and the family of Jesus. It has been a seismic shift kind of day. Once again, even in his final moments, Jesus succeeded in turning the world on its head.

The disciples' lesson in kingdom geography is OUR lesson and our invitation. We are invited to experience resurrection: not with our eyes, but in our lives as Christ brings our sin-induced deadness to life non-ending. We too, receive through faith in Christ, Holy Spirit who provides the energy for the continuing work of Christ in our lives. Because of resurrection and Holy Spirit, we too are Christ's witnesses to our "peeps", to those we don't consider to get it right, to those who are not "our kind of people", to those who are the furthest from us and the closest to us.

Seems like it would have been a cleaner, simpler project if Jesus could have stayed here...but God never chooses the cleanest, simplest path. God didn't create the world just for kicks, he created a good world and then created humans to work with God, to enjoy God's creation; God chose a group of people to be God's, to be the people from which God would bring salvation; God sent his only Son to save us and that Son chose a group of people to walk with him, and now God chooses people—US--to be agents of the redemption story until Christ comes again. God has always been about inviting people into God's story. God continues to be an inviting God. And so, the kingdom plan includes the church, includes you and me telling the story of redemption with lives and mouths. If we do indeed know inviting God, we too will be inviting people. Experiencing resurrection and receiving Holy Spirit calls the story out of us: it is too good to keep it in. We are to be about the things Jesus was about. Wherever we are, we are to bring Jesus, to all. You know, we were not meant to live for ourselves.

And so, church here we stand this day of ascension, the fullness of the resurrection of Christ at hand. We are called to be resurrection kingdom people: feet on the ground, hands outstretched to the world, mouths full of good news, waiting and going, telling and praying, continuing the work and teaching of Jesus Christ, energized through Holy Spirit. So friends, celebrate resurrection of Christ, live resurrection, practice resurrection, and take resurrection wherever you may go. He is risen!