

The Ascension of Our Lord (Observed)

May 28, 2017

Christ the Rock Ev Lutheran Church

Farmington, NM

Acts 1:1-11 In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach 2 until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. 3 After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. 4 On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. 5 For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

6 Then they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

7 He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. **8** But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

9 After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

10 They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. **11** "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

"Co-Workers in Christ's Kingdom"

As the spring temperatures yo-yo back and forth, I can't help wondering what is coming next. School is over for the year or about to finish in the next few days. Teachers have been dreaming of what to do the day after that last inservice session. Parents have been dreading what to do with those children and all their energy for the next few months. Students and especially graduates have been counting down the days. They couldn't wait for school to get over, but now they have to actually figure out how to keep themselves from getting bored. Anyone with a green thumb has been paying close attention to the change of the seasons. Hopefully the nights won't be dangerously cold for your fragile little sprouts. But we could also use a little break before the blazing sun and dehydrating temperatures hit. Mild weather and partly sunny skies would be perfect for getting the garden in order and the lawn tamed. But even if that happens, we know it won't last very long.

No matter what marks time for you, this is a time of transition. Things are changing. And that can be unsettling. We leave behind what we know, what is familiar. Uncertainty can bring confusion and fear. But it doesn't have to. At least not in God's kingdom. Today we celebrate Ascension. It is a time of transition as we retrace Jesus' earthly life from the manger in Bethlehem to the cross of calvary to his departure into heaven right before the eyes of his disciples. Instead of scary, it can be a celebration. Understanding the work and mission of Jesus changes things for us. Even in times of transition, we can have absolute confidence. Confidence comes from knowing we are Christ's co-workers in his kingdom.

But I'm sure it didn't feel that way to those remaining eleven apostles 2,000 years ago. Ascension is an easy Bible episode to picture in your imagination. You see Jesus gathering his disciples together for one last teachable moment. Then he simply lifts off the ground and rises into the air. He keeps going up into the atmosphere until a cloud comes between Jesus and the disciples cutting off their dumbfounded staring. I picture the disciples at the Ascension like a child getting lost inside a grocery store. They look around, and all of a sudden, Jesus is gone. What do they do now? A panic sets in. Their hearts race. Worst-case scenarios rise in their minds. The confusion and panic ruled those hearts of the disciples because they had a bigger misunderstanding about the purpose and work of Jesus' ministry.

Jesus appeared to them repeatedly after his resurrection on Easter. He gave them promises of divine power. But their lingering question was off the mark: **"Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"** (Acts 1:6) Jesus came as God's Son. Jesus came to show who he really was. Jesus came to fulfill his mission as the promised Messiah. But to the disciples, it still looked like something was missing.

Now will it happen? Now will you really display your power and glory, Jesus? We can relate to those questions from the disciples. After all, doesn't Jesus understand the things he should be doing for us? Doesn't Jesus understand we could use some victory in our lives? When will we get to share in the victory Jesus won? When will we get to see the results of Jesus' conquering power over all his enemies?

All these questions go up into the clouds as Jesus just floats away into the atmosphere. And with Jesus go all of our expectations about Jesus like a little kid watching a balloon float off into oblivion. It's kind of disheartening for fans when it happens, but sometimes our sports heroes call it quits way before we expect them to. Why? They have achieved their dreams. They have accomplished everything they set out to do. They don't need to prove anything to anyone. And they won't ever have to worry about money ever again.

When Jesus ascended into heaven, it was an unmistakable marker that he accomplished everything he had set out to do. His ministry was a finished product. Jesus had predicted over and over to the disciples that he would have to suffer and die and rise again. But so often they brushed those words aside because they had their own expectations. This ascension was meant to put a stop to any other speculations about what Jesus really came to do.

And just in case, Luke does a quick recap for us. He reaches back to Jesus' suffering. Jesus experienced physical torment because of every life lived out of sync with God's will. He endured the punishment of profound misunderstandings for our own purpose and direction in life. Jesus endured all the misery that comes from our lives scarred by confusion and disappointment. But Luke makes it clear Jesus appeared alive again to his disciples. An alive Jesus meant the death of confusion and panic for sinful souls. Jesus had a very clear idea about what his life was all about and gives clarity to souls troubled by guilt and shame. Jesus lives to put an end to doubt and confusion and panic and in their place give God's children peace.

Jesus appeared over and over again, in different ways and at distinct times. Luke tells us these added up to **“many convincing proofs.”** (Acts 1:3) This is the same word that a medical professional would use when looking at test results to show your numbers prove you have been cured, your physical strength is allowing you to return home from the hospital. Jesus showed himself to disciples, allowing them to touch him, eating with them, showing the historical reliability of his actual and physical resurrection from the dead. This was meant to be a light-bulb moment for those disciples. They had their understanding of Scripture and their expectations for spiritual victory. Now all of their understanding would be filtered through Jesus’ life and death and resurrection. He had completed his work of securing salvation in heaven for all those who believe in him.

But that doesn’t mean Jesus retired when he ascended into heaven. Actually, he is just entering a new phase in his work. Jesus is just making a transition in his work at his ascension. The most insightful clue about this is easy to overlook. We have to go back to the opening words of the Book of Acts: **“In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.”** (Acts 1:1,2) Did you catch it? Everything that Jesus did and taught that were recorded in the Gospel according to Luke were just the beginning. That means there must be a continuation. Jesus finished his work. But the Jesus story isn’t over. Jesus continues to act and teach even after his ascension. It’s just that now he does it through his followers.

For that new phase in Jesus’ doing and teaching to get going would take an angelic nudge. The disciples were still staring slackjawed into the sky. Two men, they must be angels, come to snap them out of their stupor. We can’t blame them for staring longingly after Jesus. And so the words of the angels **“Why do you stand here looking into the sky?”** aren’t a disciplinary slap in the face. (Acts 1:11) They’re more of a gentle wake-up type of slap in the face. Get their attention and turn their attention to more important things. Namely, Jesus had given them a job and a glorious promise.

Moving up can be a little intimidating. Getting a promotion you didn’t know you really wanted or moving to the next level in school can give you vote of confidence, but they can also fill you with doubt. What if you’re not ready? What if the next level gets you in over your head?

Followers of Jesus then and today require a transition in the way we see ourselves. Jesus calls us his co-workers in his kingdom. Just before he removes himself physically from them, Jesus tells his disciples: **“you will be my witnesses.”** (Acts 1:8) Notice Jesus doesn’t say “you might be my witnesses” or “if you’re good enough, I’ll start to use you” or “maybe some day you will attain the level of my witness.” No, it will happen. This is reality for followers of Jesus. A witness doesn’t have to make up or invent anything. Witnesses simply tell what they have seen and heard. That’s why Jesus was so careful to make those appearances to his disciples and take the time to teach them. Now it is their turn to simply testify about the significance of the life of Jesus and his ministry.

Jesus gives you a calling and promises to prepare you. Jesus gets you ready. Jesus tells those disciples: **“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”** (Acts 1:8) Jesus promises power. In the Book of Acts we get to see some of those demonstrations of power as miracles put God’s works on display. But this promise is essentially much more basic than that. This time between Jesus’ ascension and his return will be marked by the power of the Holy Spirit at work in Jesus’ disciples. The Holy Spirit has given you the power to know and trust Christ, to know what Jesus has done for you and for all people. Now you have the power to be his witness. You have the power to speak boldly.

That helps make sense of the way Jesus answered the last question of the disciples before he ascended. They wanted to know the time frame of God’s restoration. Jesus just wants followers to shift from when to how. Jesus builds his kingdom through you. God’s kingdom doesn’t come through armies or battles. It comes to hearts through the good news of what Jesus has done. Jesus rules hearts by his grace. And you have an important part to play in that kingdom.

That doesn’t change whether Jesus is right in front of you or whether Jesus is ruling on his heavenly throne. It doesn’t change whether you have a family of 8 or are single, whether you are on the top of your career or you are stuck in a dead end job, whether your doctor uses you as the standard of health to judge all other patients or whether you get a sense of accomplishment just by getting up in the morning. Jesus doesn’t rule in your life by making you successful or giving you perfect health or dropping millions of dollars in your lap. His lives in your heart with his unconquerable love. You are his witness when you are living by his grace. You witness for Jesus. You witness about Jesus. It is all about Jesus.

Have you ever thought about writing a personal mission statement for your life? You want to do important work and do it well. But you are more than your career. You love your family and want to show them they are a top priority. But those family relationships change over time and your place in them has to adapt. Even the things you enjoy in your free time don’t really define you. Jesus gives you a real calling for life. By his grace you know who you are and what He has done for you. You get the chance to take up the ascension angels’ challenge. Jesus has called you and given you a promise. Until Jesus comes back, you are his witness. You have his promise to believe. You have his power to propel you into action. Life can be confusing. Transitions can bring uncertainty. But you know who you are and what you are. You are co-workers in Christ’s kingdom. Amen.