

Ascension Sunday (Year A): Luke 24:44-53 and Acts 1:1-11

Big Picture:

1) This is the seventh of the seven weeks of Eastertide (poetically one more week than the six weeks of Lent), and the fourth of four weeks exploring Jesus' teachings about faith, discipleship, and living in intimacy with God. This Sunday is often celebrated as "Ascension Sunday," marking the risen Jesus' departure after 40 days of dwelling with the community of disciples. Next week is Pentecost, the birth of the church!

2) Bethany was a village about two miles east of Jerusalem, on the lower slopes of the Mount of Olives — and the Mount of Olives was the place God was expected to appear on "the day of the LORD" to reign "over all the earth" (Zech 14:4-9). It's the same place from which Jesus begins his Palm Sunday procession into Jerusalem (Luke 19:29-40).

3) For Luke, who also wrote Acts, the bookends of Jesus' ministry are baptism and ascension, "the baptism of John until the day he was taken up from us," and Acts is about the birth and early work of the church (Acts 1:22). Thus the Ascension serves as a key turning point in the overall two-volume story, the hinge between Part One and Part Two. Indeed, the Book of Acts could be subtitled, "Jesus Ascends, the Holy Spirit Descends, and the Church is Born."

4) Many in Luke's audience would have understood the details of Jesus' ascension to mirror Elijah's (2 Kings 2) — though here there are no chariots or horses of fire, but rather simply an enveloping cloud, the ancient symbol of divine presence (for example, see Exodus 24:15-18). Elijah's departure includes a succession (his protege, Elisha, takes up his mantle), and Jesus follows the same pattern: he bequeaths his mantle to the church. The figures in white robes add to the atmosphere of heaven-on-earth, recalling the "two men in dazzling clothes" the women encounter at Jesus' tomb (Luke 24:4).

Scripture:

1) After all the weeks and months and more the disciples have spent with Jesus during his public ministry prior to his resurrection, and now after 40 days with him *after* the resurrection, we might think the disciples would be starting to catch on, that they'd have at least a decent understanding of what Luke calls "the scriptures." But they don't. They're still confused and mixed up and doubtful — joyful, yes, but "in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering" (Luke 24:41). And so even here, in his very last moments with them before his ascension, Jesus is still their teacher: *Let's go over this one more time...* He "opens their minds to understanding the scriptures" — which is to say, prior to this eleventh-hour moment, even after all they'd been through, the disciples' minds were still closed (Luke 24:45).

2) Luke's larger point here is that there's a difference between "knowing" scripture and truly understanding it, and even the most well-informed, scripture-quoting Christians — even the disciples! — need Jesus as a guide and teacher in order to grasp the essential good news. In other words, it's never simply about "what the Bible says." It's always about understanding the Bible with wisdom and grace.

3) And then Jesus throws them one last curve ball. In the procession into Jerusalem just a month-and-a-half ago (the one we celebrate on Palm Sunday), Jesus and his entourage approached from Bethany, a village on the slopes of the Mount of Olives, the prestigious location from which the Messiah was expected to arrive (Zech 14:4). To arrive, yes — and also to conquer and remain and rule. For the disciples, then, coming down from Bethany into Jerusalem must have felt right: *the long wait is over, the prophecy is fulfilled!* But now Jesus leads them in the opposite direction. Now, instead of entering Jerusalem, they're leaving it. Now, instead of descending from the Mount of Olives, they climb it. They retrace their steps. And now, instead of the Messiah arriving, the Messiah will — *could this be right?* — withdraw and depart. The choreography is striking, and on its face, disturbing: the long-expected pattern of salvation is turned on its head!

4) But this disconcerting reversal only makes Jesus' message more clear: he is passing the mantle. It's as if he says, *You have heard it said, 'Wait for a Messiah who will deliver you from trouble.' But I say to you, Take up*

my mantle, for you, too, have a role to play in God's story of redemption. You! You will now take the baton, you will now descend from the Mount of Olives and enter the holy city, "beginning from Jerusalem." You are "witnesses of these things," you shall proclaim the good news with your words and especially with your lives, you, all of you, I hereby commission you and bless you and send you into the world for the love of the world! (Luke 24:47-48,50-51).

5) And we do not go alone. In the passage from Acts, even as Jesus ascends into the cloud of divine presence, he promises Pentecost: "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you," an event Jesus promises will happen "not many days from now," after which "you will be my witnesses...to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8,5). Into the world, for the love of the world! The same idea underpins the question the angelic figures ask the disciples as Jesus withdraws: "Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" (Acts 1:11). It's as if they're saying, *Get on with it! Jesus will return in due course, but that's not your concern. Your mission is to receive the Spirit and go into the world proclaiming the good news that the kingdom of God is at hand, that God's great Jubilee has begun!*

Takeaways:

1) What should we make of Jesus commissioning us "into the world"? In the first place, "the world" includes our personal lives and homes and families and friends, both the people we live with and the people with whom we're in touch — so we can live out Jesus' commission by living together with love and forgiveness, and by reaching out to those who need encouragement and companionship. And second, there are all kinds of ways to connect with the wider world, from volunteering our time to donating money to supporting policies that protect the most vulnerable. Now more than ever, with wisdom and vigor: *Into the world, for the love of the world!*

2) As Pentecost approaches, this week and next are a perfect time to reflect on what it means to be "church." The church is a community that not only "follows" Jesus in the sense of listening to him and learning from him; we also are a community who "follows" Jesus in the sense of succeeding him, of taking up his mantle and carrying on his life and work, all so that God's joy and our joy might be complete, not just here and there, but "to the ends of the earth." As the body of Christ (the Galilean) recedes into a cloud, the Body of Christ (the church) prepares to be born next week, at Pentecost, a golden opportunity for congregations to recommit to their defining mission: *Into the world, for the love of the world!*

3) The fact that Jesus departs at all is worthy of reflection. Many founders of movements or companies or political parties stay around as long as they can (often staying too long!), and according to the Gospels, the risen Jesus is presumably impervious to death, and so could have remained indefinitely. From this angle, the fact that he leaves reveals what sort of movement he has in mind: a community not standing around admiring him or merely waiting for him ("Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?"), but rather active and present in the world, carrying on his work of healing, justice, and proclaiming the dawn of God's joyous Jubilee. In the end, the Ascension itself is meant to invite and empower the church to be all the more down-to-earth. *Into the world, for the love of the world!*

4) Try this as a benediction for this week, a compact theology of what Christian worship is for, whether in person or online: "Friends, how good and pleasant it is to be together, in person or in spirit, encouraging and consoling, provoking and inspiring. But now the service is ended. Now the wider service begins. Why do you stand looking up toward heaven? Go in peace — into the world, for the love of the world!"