

“What, Me Witness? Yes, You”
Day of Ascension – 5.21.2020 – Luke 24:44-52; Acts 1:1-11/B

Luke 24:44-53

(Jesus) said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, 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, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. 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.”

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Acts 1:1-11

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. “This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

Grace and peace to you from God, the Creator, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Some of you may have seen the meme I shared on Advent’s Facebook page yesterday. It said: Tomorrow is Ascension Day – and for those of you who wonder what that’s about, it’s the day Jesus started working from home. They say that Jesus experienced everything there is to experience about being human, but until I saw that meme, it never occurred to me that Jesus would be working from home!

Which is why I am so glad that there is this little pause in the 50 days of Easter - a 40 days-in marker called Ascension Day. This festival is what I would call the true “birthday of the church.” (Even though we point to Pentecost as the birthday of church, Pentecost is really the “empowering” of the church.) But the day Jesus went home to be with the Father is the real start-date - the turning point for lives of faith, the calling, commissioning, the graduation of the disciples into a community that would be called **Christians**. So, as we pause on Ascension Day, we are preparing to finish our Easter semester and get ready for our final exam, which is the next season of growth and faith and discipleship.

We really should make more of Ascension Day; but it’s no wonder... It’s hard to celebrate a day that reminds us of God’s **absence** - that makes us face the paradox of God’s vision and our reality. Author Rob Bell says preaching, like art, creates space where stuff

can happen – and that is exactly what happens in the Biblical story, as God opens up spaces that allows for *something bigger than ourselves* to happen.

The Ascension of Jesus is told in two stories. The first is at the end of Luke, Book I (*the Gospel*) and the second is at the beginning of Luke, Book 2 (*the Acts of the Apostles*.) Ascension is important because it helps us set our course, write our agenda, prepare ourselves as our lives begin to be changed by the Easter Promise. And the intersection point is what Jesus says in both of these stories written by Luke: “**You are witnesses.**”

Then, just like that, Jesus left us. We see the truth - **his** work here was finished. His return to the Father opened the space for **our** work to begin, and we were not left on our own. We’re empowered by the Spirit of *the GOD who comes* - the God who has been in **our** skin - who knows what life in this place is all about. God’s love and God’s mission are clear: *You are witnesses.*

But of what are WE witnesses? I want to invite you to imagine you are with the 11 in Bethany. How would you feel as Jesus ascends? *Abandoned? Scared? Overwhelmed by loss? What are you thinking as you watch him go home? How will I live without him in my life? What will I do, now that he’s gone?* (Not sure what you’d be thinking?) Well, it may be much like the mixed emotions you feel at a funeral. you are happy for the deceased to be home with God, but sad to lose them in your life. You might be relieved that their journey has ended, but angry that they have left you alone. We carry a mixture of emotions whenever we are stepping from familiar space into the something new. And today we have a whole new appreciation of what it is like to be *not only* a participant, but to actually BE a witness to “something new”, as the world all around us is remaking itself – reimagining our space.

“Something new” often mixes fear with excitement. Remember baby’s first steps, the day the training wheels came off, the 1st day of school? Remember the exhilaration of your first time off the high dive, the solo trip in the car, your first love, your first job, your first home? These are all part of the human experience which requires us to routinely take a “leap of faith...” into the unknown. Just remember that you are **not alone**; there have been many witnesses who have stepped out in faith before you, and there will be many following in your footsteps.

But is knowing there is a creative space to be filled enough to be our witness? With what fuel will we continue to answer life’s questions? Let me suggest something to ponder: “**Have you witnessed Easter?**” Now, think about how you’d answer that question, “Have you witnessed Easter?” Obviously, none of us were there at the empty tomb, but we’ve experienced the women’s mix of fear and excitement - virtually - every Easter of our lives. We KNOW - when God raised Jesus from the dead that something entirely new began: we were *forgiven* – our lives could be **brand new** and our death would no longer be the **end of our story**. (Pause) And now we are witnesses to that truth with every relationship, every conversation, every moment, every breath.

Just as we know that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, we know that what he told us is true. Because you know Jesus, you know God. And you know that when Jesus returned to the Father after dwelling among us, he left us the gift of the Easter promise: *nothing will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus*. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. That is what we **know**. That is **why** we share. That is why God sends **US** into an anxious and weary world.

Here is the secret to this whole thing. Jesus brought God to us. Then Jesus brought us to God. We know the story, and we have been chosen for **who we are** – to tell it with our lives. And here is something else: God isn't interested in your **witness**, as much as God is interested in **your** witness! Thank you, Jesus, for trusting us with this work. May we, honor you every day after this day, and be a witness to your love. Amen.

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