

Ascension of Our Lord – May 29, 2022

Luke 24:44-53, Acts 1:1-11

44[Jesus said to the eleven and those with 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.” 45Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, 46and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, 47 and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. 48You are witnesses of these things. 49And 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.”

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

[Luke writes:] 1 In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning 2 until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. 3After 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. 4While 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; 5

for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

6So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” 7He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 8But 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.” 9When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. 11They 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.”

“He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the father.”

On the one hand, we don’t talk much about the Ascension of Jesus. I mean, we do, because we say that one line as we recite the creeds every week. But the Day of the Ascension doesn’t land on a Sunday so we have to move it if we want to commemorate it at all. I made that decision to do so here at Grace some weeks ago. There’s no telling what

state the world would be in when I did. And now it feels rather awkward in some ways.

We talk of the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus each much more than we do his ascension into heaven. It sounds as if it should be this great joyous thing to celebrate. What a glorious illustration of the divinity of Jesus! He goes off to Heaven, the clouds whisk him away and angelic figures appear to the awestruck disciples.

But was it really all that wonderful? I think of the roller coaster ride the poor disciples have been on, about three years' learning from Jesus and witnessing to his ministry, enduring the grief of his death for three days, the elation and confusion alike of his resurrection, 40 days together and now this. Now he is leaving them again and for a lot longer this time.

This is a moment that is truly bittersweet. I think Luke captures this beautifully when he writes, "While he was

blessing them, he withdrew from them ...” What a mixed message that is.

And before Jesus does this, it’s evident his disciples still haven’t given up on a conventional understanding of his ministry. “Are you gonna restore the Kingdom of Israel now? That’s what this all is leading up to, right? Right???”

But it’s so much bigger than that. This is about the Kingdom of Heaven. This is about the Holy Spirit and all the Spirit is empowering the people of God to do. It’s about everything Jesus has just said.

So why do you stand looking up toward heaven, indeed?

As with the state-sanctioned violence that killed Jesus and the violent threats that the disciples faced even after his Resurrection, we are living in traumatic times. There isn’t enough time to process Buffalo’s mass shooting before Laguna Woods’ mass shooting before Uvalde’s mass

shooting of children. Just these three *latest* killing sprees demonstrate a sad reality. That there's no guarantee of safety. Not anywhere. Not in picking up a few items at a grocery store. Not in attending a church worship service. Not even in being a little kid sitting in a classroom at school.

All the while a global pandemic still lingers. A faraway war makes an impact that ripples even here and threatens to expand with no end in sight. There's a housing crisis and an opioid epidemic and a terrible mental health situation just beyond these doors.

And it's heartbreaking. And it's frustrating. And it's infuriating. And it's all these things all at once. And it's exhausting.

I think we can look up toward heaven for the ascended Jesus and feel all these things and more. Why do you leave us and when are you coming back? (The men robed in white say *how* he will return again but not when.)

Why couldn't you just stay and fix it?

And where do we go from here?

It's easy to forget that Jesus did not leave us behind with nothing. It's not blasphemous to say that we feel abandoned sometimes, especially in times like these. It's understandable to be left with our jaws dropped, stunned by the events that have unfolded before us.

But it's important to know that our predecessors in the Christian faith did not remain in that state for long. Nor should we. The first chapter of the Book of Acts continues, in verses 12 through 14: Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying ... All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer."

And like them, we ought to begin there. With prayer. But we have not obeyed the word of Jesus if we stop there. The

calls for thoughts and prayers in the wake of these recurring tragedies have come to ring hollow. We need to act, on our own as individuals, bound together in community as church, and in holding those who represent us accountable for the work we elected them to do. Until we do these things, on the eve of this Memorial Day, I fear we also risk letting the sacrifice of those who died in service to this country be in vein. No one fights and dies so that their children and grandchildren, parents and grandparents, have to live in conditions akin to a war zone.

Jesus' disciples began long ago to carry his Gospel as Good News to the ends of the earth. That work is not finished and it's part of our responsibility now. It's not that Jesus *left* us to sit at the right hand of the Father in Heaven. He remains with us in a different manner. Dr. Matthew Skinner, who I had the privilege to hear from last week at the Festival of Homiletics, wrote that "by virtue of his elevation to this

status, Jesus *reigns* over all creation. Creation is *his*. He has a role in everything. Therefore he is present throughout all creation through the Holy Spirit. Contrary to some popular assumptions, this event does not put Jesus out of play until the end of all things. He and the kingdom he inaugurated are not on an extended break.”

May his Spirit guide our way through these most difficult days.

May he come again in glory, to judge both the living and the dead, and may his kingdom have no end.

Amen.