

Easter 7 A
Ascension Sunday
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Picking Up Where He Left Off
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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 over the course of 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 God. '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 God has set by their 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 towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, 'People of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards 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.'

John 17:10-11

All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. God, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.

I saw a meme on Facebook recently that read: “Tomorrow is the feast of the Ascension. To those who wonder what it’s about: It’s the day when Jesus started to work from home.” I like that explanation and it’s relatable given that so many people now work from home, at least some time. Admittedly, it’s a bit overly simplistic, but basically, that’s what the Ascension is. According to the author of the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, about forty days after Easter, Jesus physically arose into heaven, presumably to join God there—to “work from home,” as the meme suggests. It’s a strange story and it leaves me with many questions.

Firstly, I wonder, is there a biblical precedent for this kind of earthly departure or is the ascension truly unique to Jesus? Secondly, if this story was really so important, why was it only included by the author Luke and not Matthew, Mark, or John? Thirdly, what did early Christians think about this story? And finally, what does the Ascension of Jesus mean for us today? In the next few moments, we’ll consider these questions.

To the first question: Yes, there is a biblical precedent for this kind of earthly departure. The Ascension of Jesus mirrors in many ways the Hebrew Bible’s story of the Ascension of Elijah in the book of II Kings. In a much more dramatic tale, Elijah, a great prophet, is taken into heaven in a fiery chariot after commissioning his successor, Elisha, and bequeathing to him his own spirit in order for Elisha to continue his work. So, there is a precedent.

To the second question: as we know, the story of the Ascension was included only by the author of Luke/Acts—why? Author and scholar John Shelby Spong points out that the author of Luke’s gospel drew many parallels between Jesus and Elijah, whereas the other gospel writers seemed to prefer paralleling Jesus and Moses. The bottom line is, though, that these authors were simply writing to different audiences and had their own unique preferences about how to connect the story of Jesus to the ancient story of the Hebrew people. While Elijah’s story culminates in the passing of his spirit to his successor before he ascends, Jesus’ story culminates in the passing of God’s spirit to “*all* of his disciples, then and

throughout the ages”¹ at Pentecost, which we will be celebrating next week.

To the third question: while it’s impossible to know exactly what all early Christians thought about Luke’s ascension story, we can know that enough of them gave it credence that it was included in the Nicene Creed of 325. That creed included the line: “He suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven; From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.” It was reaffirmed in 381 by the council of Constantinople in the line: “He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered, and was buried, and the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father, from thence he shall come again, with glory, to judge the quick and the dead.”

And now, to the last question: what does it mean for me? This really is the crux of the matter. Whether it’s the story of the Ascension or the birth narratives, the crucifixion accounts, or the tales of the resurrection, these stories only really matter if they inform us for living, guide us for loving, and shape us for serving. Honestly, I’m inclined to think that this story has very little to do with Jesus at all...and a lot to do with us. Luke’s author writes that just before he ascended, Jesus promised the disciples that God’s spirit would come to them and enable them to be witnesses to Jesus’ message in the world. Like Elijah, he commissioned his successors, ensuring that his work would continue. The ascension is less about Jesus’ dramatic exit and more about his followers’ entrance. Friends, this is where we come in.

John’s author summarized it well in their version from Jesus’ farewell discourse – his long goodbye. “And now I am no longer in the world,” Jesus says, “but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. God, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.”

¹ Spong, John Shelby. “*Unbelievable*,” San Francisco: HarperOne, 2018, page 195.

As Christians, as those who are still in the world, we are commissioned as Jesus' successors to continue his work—to see need, to address pain and brokenness, to appreciate beauty, to make peace, and to build heaven's realm of unity, justice, and love here and now and for all. It's a daunting charge. But it's ours—yours and mine and ours together as the church in the world.

I've quoted her before, but Teresa of Avila captures this charge so beautifully. She writes: "Christ has no body now on earth but ours; ours are the only hands with which he can do his work, ours are the only feet with which he can go about the world, ours are the only eyes through which his compassion can shine forth upon a troubled world." *This* is exactly what Jesus commissioned his followers to be.

The ascension is, I believe, less about Jesus' stage exit and more about our stage entry on the scene to carry on where our teacher left off—successors in his work: his hands, feet, eyes, and body to bring heaven's realm to earth right here, right now, for all. The question for us is two-fold: Will we pick up where Jesus left off? And how will we do it?

May his spirit be our guide. Amen.