

Jim Vitale
May 24, 2020

Eyes on the Ground
Acts 1:1-12

Pr. Jim's Sermon
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Ascension Sunday
Acts 1:1-12

One moment he is there; the next moment he is gone.

They stand slackjawed, staring up at the sky, puzzled by what they have just seen. The messiah has done it again—another strange and miraculous event that would send his follower's minds reeling for decades, maybe even centuries, let alone millennia. This is the messiah who gave sight to the blind, mobility to the lame, restoration to the lepers, sound to the deaf, and life to the dead; this is the messiah who challenged religious leaders, opposed the government, *died* on a cross, and *lived* to tell about it. He is full of mystery and here on a cloudy afternoon, he does it again.

Standing before the apostles, this messiah gives them one final lesson and then suddenly begins floating up to the heavens. The apostles stand, mouths gaping, at this strange and awesome sight, following their master higher, higher, up into the sky until he is just a small dot in the blue, and then, eventually, obscured by a passing cloud.

Moments pass. And the apostles just stand staring into the great blue heavens, a "what the heck just happened" expression on their faces. Another moment passes.

"Men of Galilee," says a voice from beside them. "what are you looking at?"

Jostled, the apostles lower their stares to see two men, clothed in white, addressing them. Overwhelmed by the strangeness of it all, the apostles continue their befuddled gawking, only this time at the two guys who appeared out of nowhere. "What do you expect to find way up there in the sky?" They repeat.

Met with more blank stares, the two men go on, "Jesus has gone away, yes, but he's coming back. But never mind that for now; there's work to do." Gently, the apostles fall out of their trance and head back home to wait for whatever strange mystery might happen next.

Martin Luther encourages us "to call a thing what it is," so let's be honest and say that the ascension is a strange thing, is it not? I'm not sure that we really know what to do with it. It's not a central focus of our faith, really, not like the crucifixion or resurrection or second coming. We gloss over the ascension because frankly, it's *weird*. But today we celebrate Ascension of our Lord Sunday so we have to talk about it.

Matthew, Mark, and John do not depict the ascension at all. It is only in Luke and Acts that we actually see Jesus ascend into heaven. As you may know, the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles were written by the same person. Luke focuses on the works of Jesus; Acts focuses on the works of the Holy Spirit. As we just heard in our readings, Luke *ends* with Jesus' ascension;

Acts *begins* with Jesus' ascension. The ascension, therefore, serves as a sort of hinge-point, the moment of transition between Jesus' earthly ministry and the Holy Spirit's earthly ministry.

How you understand the ascension will depend on what gospel you are reading. In John's gospel, Jesus' ascension seems to be more important than his resurrection because it is the ascension, and not the resurrection, that creates a place for us in God's abiding love. So it's funny that John only *talks* about the ascension, but never actually *shows* it to us...

In Luke and Acts, however, Jesus' ascension means something a little different. First and foremost, it is the way Jesus is glorified. After his death and resurrection, Jesus ascends into heaven so that he can sit at the right hand of the Father in glory. But there's another function as well. By his ascension, Jesus makes way for the Holy Spirit to fill the world and continue God's ministry. The Book of Acts makes the profound claim that the heart of God's ministry lies not only in what Jesus *did*, but in what believers *will do* by the power of the Holy Spirit.

I think the opening scene of Acts is one of the most amusing in all of scripture. You can just see the dumbfounded look on the apostles' faces as Jesus miraculously floats out of sight like an untethered balloon. You can almost hear the apostles muttering "what just happened?" And, quite frankly, I can fully understand why they just kept staring until someone interrupted them. Their teacher, their friend, their savior just disappeared. Is he coming back? Are we supposed to follow him? What does it all mean?

Thankfully, the two angels show up and pull the apostles back down to earth. Don't focus up on the heavens, they say; it's time to focus down on the earth.

After witnessing the ascension, it's tempting to focus all our attention on where Jesus went and to think only of trying to get there ourselves.

I'm a big fan of country music, especially the old stuff. Isabel and I have been working our way through Ken Burns' fabulous new documentary about the history of country music, and I have been struck by how many old hymns are concerned with a life beyond this one. One goes like this:

*Some bright morning when this life is o'er
I'll fly away
To a home on God's celestial shore
I'll fly away*

*I'll fly away oh glory
I'll fly away
When I die Hallelujah by and by
I'll fly away*

And here's another:

*This world is not my home I'm just a-passin' through
My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue
The angels beckon me from heaven's open door
And I can't feel at home in this world anymore*

I understand where these hymns come from, and I don't want to dismiss them outright. They have been powerful for people whose lives have been hard. Hymns like "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,"

*Swing low, sweet chariot,
Comin' for to carry me home.
Swing low, sweet chariot,
Comin' for to carry me home.*

were particularly popular among enslaved African Americans as they longed to be free of a life filled with suffering and despair. People of all times and places who have experienced hardship have longed to escape this world and go straight on to heaven. It's an understandable and even necessary part of the life of faith.

But it's not the central message of the book of Acts. Acts begins with the disciples asking Jesus a misguided question: "Now that you've died and been resurrected, are you finally going to restore Israel?" Their question misses the point. Even after all this time, they still don't fully understand what Jesus is doing. And Jesus replies, "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." It seems like he's changing the subject, doesn't it? But actually, I think he's giving them an answer.

Jesus is telling the apostles that they will fulfill a promise God made to Abraham long, long ago.

You see, way back in Genesis, God told a man named Abraham that he would be the father of God's own chosen nation, the nation of Israel. God said that Abraham would be blessed to be a blessing, that in Abraham all the families of the earth would be blessed. That is to say, God would eventually use Abraham's descendants to bless the whole world.

Flash forward to Acts, to Jesus' final words to his apostles. Jesus says, "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Jesus instructs his disciples to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, which is to say all of Israel. But the apostles won't be there long—soon they will be sent out to bring the good news of Jesus to the whole world. In this way, the apostles and all followers of Jesus will fulfill the promise to Abraham and bless the whole world. And that's what the rest of the Book of Acts is all about.

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The ascension is the moment when Jesus steps aside to make way for the Holy Spirit to send Jesus' followers out into the world.

The apostles were tempted to keep staring up into the heavens, pining after Jesus, wishing they could follow him up there. But, as the Book of Acts shows us, that's not our primary concern as followers of Jesus. We're not "working hard to get to heaven" or just "staring up at heaven" as Alan Jackson sings in his song "Where I Come From." The life of a disciple, the life of a follower of Jesus is not to fixate on heaven but to look out into the world. Our mission is not up in the sky but right here on the ground. We walk this earth, our home, because God has invited us to be part of God's work *in the world*. We long not for the sky, but for this world, where we can bring the good news of Jesus to our neighbors close by and far away.

So, people of Beaver Lutheran Church, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? As we will hear next week at the celebration of Pentecost, we have received the power of the Holy Spirit; and now we are Jesus' witnesses, in the Beaver Community, in all Snyder County and Pennsylvania, and to the ends of the earth.

And so we sing:

*The Lord now sends us forth
with hands to serve and give,
to make of all the earth
a better place to live.*

*The angels are not sent
into our world of pain
to do what we were meant
to do in Jesus' name;
that falls to you and me
and all who are made free.
Help us, O Lord, we pray,
to do your will today.*

Amen.