

Pastor's Message – 5/21/23
Acts 1:1-11; Luke 24:44-53

It is something of an understatement to say that Ascension Day is not one of the major holidays in the United States. Not even a lot of churches make a big deal out of the Ascension of Jesus. I wasn't really expecting a larger congregation than usual for this Ascension worship service. To my knowledge, there are no retailers who advertise discounts for Ascension Day, no restaurants that prepare an Ascension Day special, and no major employers that the Monday after Ascension as a paid holiday. Surprisingly, there are Ascension Day greeting cards available. I'm not sure, however, how appropriate hot air balloons are for observing the Ascension of Jesus.

How many of you are here specifically to hear me preach about Ascension? Surely you must have been thinking about Ascension all week long, right? Probably not. You've had bigger fish to fry. Balancing your checkbook. Worried about the health of friends or your child's or grandchildren's sports games. The doctor or dentist appointment. Your vacation or camping plans. Nobody here has been sitting around saying, "I just can't wait to hear what the preacher has to say about Ascension."

But today, we have not one, but two Ascension stories from the Bible. You may remember that Luke wrote both the Acts of the Apostles and the Gospel of Luke. They are two volumes of one work. In his day, one could not easily cut and paste a passage from one document to the other, otherwise his account of the Ascension of Jesus into heaven might be exactly the same in both. But today we can, and I did – cut and paste them together. But perhaps the reason Luke wrote two versions is because he wanted to focus on two very different things about the same event.

In the Acts reading, from chapter 11, verse 8, Jesus says, "you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Then, toward the end of the gospel passage, he says, "stay here in the city," and they did. "they spent all of their time in the Temple, praising God (Luke 24:53)."

The Ascension is vitally important to our understanding of the story of Jesus and the church. Forty days after Jesus' resurrection, Jesus tells his disciples what they are to do next. There on the Mount of Olives, Jesus gives his disciples a strategy for implementing the resurrection life of the new creation in the present. He has spent three years instructing and training them for this moment, and now, as he ascends to take his royal place with the Father, he commissions his disciples to carry on his work until he returns to bring it to completion.

For Jesus' disciples, the ascension was a powerful catalyst to get them to work on the mission Jesus had left them. The days prior to Jesus' murder had been brutal for them. They scattered and hid out. Imagine the confusion and despair. Were their last three years a big mistake? If they weren't killed, too, what would they do next? Fish again? Collect taxes?

But the resurrection changed everything. The disciples' mission was on again. The opening question of the Acts text makes perfect sense: "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"

"[Y]ou will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (v. 8). Who is "you?" to whom is Jesus giving instructions. To whom is Luke writing? "In my first book I told you, Theophilus, ..." Theophilus could be a specific individual, but *theophilus* means "lover of God," so Luke may be writing to all who love God. So, it could be that Luke is writing to all of us. And we are all, then, charged by Jesus will be [His] witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (v. 8).

I've already been talking about the 3 proposed new Mission Statements for the Waupun United Methodist Church. All Christians, all *theophoils/ae*, all *love[r]s of God*, have the same basic mission, given by Jesus Himself, but that mission is expressed differently in differently based on the specific gifts and call by and through the Holy Spirit. The SPRC has spent considerable time, discussion, prayer and reflection in writing three possible mission statements, written that a "runner can read them," written that anyone can commit them to memory and share them easily.

You've seen them already, on the easels in the Fellowship Room, in the newsletter, on bulletin inserts, and again today on the screen during worship.

We have the 4 "B's":

- 1 - Help every person to
 - BELIEVE in Jesus
 - BELONG to a faith family
 - BECOME a follower of Jesus and
 - BUILD a world filled with God's love and grace.

The 3 "G's":

2. We welcome you to
 - GATHER with us in fellowship
 - GROW in faith
 - GO into the world to share God's love

And the reordering of 1 Corinthians 13:

3. Be a Church that
 - Lives by FAITH
 - Is known by LOVE and
 - Is a voice of HOPE to the world.

You will be asked to vote on these proposals. Which one, do you feel, best describes the particular mission and call of this church? Which one speaks most strongly to you? Which one could you most easily commit to memory and be able to talk about? Notice that all of the words in these proposed mission statements are active words. They all call us to, not just stay in the temple praising God, but to be disciples and spread the good news of God in Jerusalem, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

This is a huge challenge, but we have divine help! "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you," promises Jesus. The word "power" here is the Greek word *dynamis*, the root of the English word "dynamite." This is a robust and earth-shaking force, one that can topple earthly kingdoms and clear a path for God's kingdom. This power is to be exercised in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and even to the ends of the earth. Filled with this Holy-Spirit-energy, "lovers of God" are to evangelize, take the good news and be the good news of Jesus Christ to every corner of the world.

Luke's gospel shares with us the promise of Jesus. "I am sending upon you what my Father promised." The promises of Jesus are that the disciples will be strengthened. Jesus had already opened their hearts and minds to know the truth proclaimed by the prophets and experienced in their lives. Jesus did not leave the disciples without hope. Jesus does not leave us without hope either. We have the hope of our faith — that God is with us, that Jesus redeems us and that the Holy Spirit strengthens and empowers us for the days ahead. The message to the disciples, the apostles, is the same message we receive as disciples of Jesus in the here and now. "it was written long ago," Jesus reminds us, "that the Messiah would suffer and die and rise from the dead on the third day. ⁴⁷ It was also written that this message would be proclaimed in the authority of his name to all the nations, beginning in Jerusalem: 'There is forgiveness of sins for all who repent.' –Luke 24:46b-47

Is there any better way to understand and observe Jesus' Ascension? The mystery, the majesty, the glory, the gravity. It is the celebration of Jesus victory over Satan, death, and the grave. It is his exultant triumph. His mission has been accomplished. Now, the disciples' mission has begun. "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (vs. 8) We celebrate that Jesus did what he set out to do and now the task is ours.

The story isn't finished. According to the timetable of our Bible readings today, the apostles haven't received God's Spirit yet, - Pentecost hasn't happened for them yet, but it says that when Jesus was taken from their midst and ascended into heaven "...they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy..." (24:52). Even though they themselves aren't in heaven, they are joyful. And we ourselves, having experienced Pentecost and again next Sunday, still learning, growing, making mistakes, are called to receive joy. Our problems aren't solved, the path isn't clear, who knows what lies ahead, but our default setting should be joy.

I know I've used it before, but it is such a great song, and expresses what our attitude should be as disciples and lovers of God, that I'd like to use it again. I want to close my Message today, not with Kermit the Frog like last week, but with a video by Lee Ann Womack, singing "I Hope You Dance."