

Sunday, May 21, 2023
Seventh Sunday of Easter (Year A)

Acts 1.6-14

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/819972016128871>

(Sermon begins at about 27:45)

“This In-Between Time”

Here on the Seventh Sunday of Easter, we find ourselves in an in-between time. The time between Jesus’ ascension, which we commemorated on Thursday, and Pentecost, which we celebrate next Sunday. A ten-day period of waiting. For most of us, we go about our daily lives, likely unaware that this is an in-between time. But for Jesus’ disciples, this is a period of profound significance. What happens in this in-between time will shape who they become, will shape the direction of the Church, and in turn, will shape who we are as followers of the Risen Christ.

Our reading from the Acts of the Apostles is one of two biblical accounts of Jesus’ ascension. The writings of the New Testament contain a number of references to the Ascension, but only two provide any details: what we heard this morning from Acts and the final verses in the Gospel according to Luke (which is the Gospel for Ascension Day). These two accounts, and particularly their placement in Scripture, seem to provide an indication of the significance of the Ascension in the life and ministry of the Church, and indeed, for all members of the Body of Christ.

Let’s step back for a moment and look at the literary context surrounding the two accounts of Jesus’ ascension. We know that both the Gospel according to Luke and the Acts of the Apostles were written by the same author, and that Acts is the sequel to Luke’s Gospel. In writing these two books, Luke chose to use the Ascension as the bridge between the two, with the Ascension being the last thing recorded in his Gospel, and the first thing recorded in Acts (after a brief introduction, that is). This is a common literary device, even in our own time. When writing a series of books, invariably the author needs to provide a recap of critical details or events, to provide the necessary continuity between the written works, and to aid in the reader’s understanding of how we got where we are. Which is precisely what is happening in Luke-Acts.

But why the Ascension as this bridge between the two books? Why not Jesus’ resurrection? Or why not Pentecost? One could make theological, as well as literary, arguments for either of these. But Luke chose to focus on the Ascension as the bridge event. And for good reason. The Ascension was the defining moment separating, the clear demarcation between, the story of Jesus’ life and ministry as recorded in the Gospel, and the continuation of that ministry through the emerging Church as recorded in Acts. And within the story of the Ascension, there is one clear defining moment that exemplifies this transition. Or rather, one defining moment that will determine the entire future of the Church and its mission and ministry.

“As [the disciples] were watching, [Jesus] 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, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven?’” As Jesus was ascending, and it is implied that even after he was gone, the disciples just stood there, looking up into the sky. Undoubtedly with confused looks on their faces. You can imagine what’s running through their minds. Probably what they even said out loud. “Wait! Where are you going? You just got back. Don’t leave us!”

Of course, this was undoubtedly an incredibly difficult moment for the disciples. Just consider the emotional roller coaster they had been on over the last two months. The excitement of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, hailed as the Messiah with shouts of “Hosanna!” Then the downward spiral over the succeeding days: Jesus’ betrayal by one of their own, his arrest, his sham trial, his being found guilty of trumped-up charges, his being beaten and mocked, all culminating in his crucifixion. But then, on the third day they received the unbelievable and glorious news that he had risen. And for the last six weeks, he had been with them, just like old times.

But now, with his Ascension, he’s gone again. The disciples seem so lost. Standing there looking up into the heavens, gazing in disbelief. “Wait! Where are you going? You just got back. Don’t leave us!” Of course, Jesus had promised he would not abandon them. He told them he would send the Holy Spirit to be their companion and guide. But when would THAT happen? Jesus didn’t give a timeline. Would it be today? Tomorrow? Next week? Even farther down the road? They were caught in a liminal time between Jesus’ Ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit. Uncertain. Paralyzed. Of course, they had options. They could go back to the lives they had before Jesus came on the scene and called them to be his disciples. Or they could go back to cowering in fear of the temple and imperial authorities, as they had done in the time between Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection.

So what are they to do? The angels asking “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven?” helps reframe their perspective, provides the clarity they need. It was as if the angels’ question contained an unspoken message: “You need to pull yourselves together and get on with the mission and ministry entrusted to you. You need to get out there and proclaim the Good News of the Risen Christ!”

The account of the Ascension in Luke’s Gospel does not contain this awkward moment of confusion and indecision. Rather, Luke just says the disciples continued to worship Jesus and to praise God. Which, as we heard in Acts, they did do, once they had their wake-up call: “why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” But that very human moment of their feeling lost, of confusion, of indecision, recorded in Acts, and the fact that they were able to move beyond those feelings, points to the critical nature of that in-between time. Points to the formative nature of the liminal time between the Ascension and Pentecost.

Luke choosing the Ascension event as the bridge between his Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles certainly seems to point to the Ascension as a critical event in the lives and ministries of the disciples. And even more so, in the development and direction for the newly forming Church. Maybe this is just what the disciples needed. They are often depicted as not quite

getting what Jesus is saying or doing. If Jesus had stuck around, they would have been back where they had been before. Living a life in Jesus' shadow. Sitting at his feet listening to his teachings. Watching as he healed the sick and performed miracles. Watching on as he did all the heavy lifting. Never having to make any hard decisions about how to live the Gospel. Witnessing the Gospel as opposed to witnessing TO the Gospel. Observing the Gospel in action as opposed to actively living the Gospel.

While it is an interesting thought experiment to consider what the world might be like if the Risen Christ had never ascended into heaven, that is obviously not the reality we live in. And maybe for good reason. Maybe Christ had to leave the disciples so they could figure out what Jesus' teachings meant for them in their own lives. So they could figure out how to carry the light of Christ for themselves. So they could figure out how to proclaim the Gospel, to proclaim the Risen Christ, to the world. Maybe they needed his absence to discover for themselves the meaning of resurrected life. Not to just be told about it, but to discover for themselves and figure out just what it meant for them. Not to just be able to talk about it, but to be able to demonstrate it by living into the fullness of resurrected life. In so doing, to provide a model for those who came after—to provide a model for us—of how we, too, can begin to live into the fullness of resurrected life. Not just sitting around and talking about Christ and his teachings, not just to bask in his love for us, but to actually live out his teachings and to demonstrate his love in tangible ways. To become the Body of Christ active in the world.

In the moments following the Ascension, the disciples had a critical decision to make. A decision that would have not only affected the trajectory of their individual lives, but would also chart the course for a whole new religious movement. They could have packed it all in, or continued with the work Christ had entrusted to them; trusting that he would fulfill his promise and send the Holy Spirit to be their companion and guide. Rather than choose the easy path, they chose to trust in their beloved friend and teacher and wait for God to send the Spirit. But this is not just a story, not just a time, of waiting on God. God waited on them to figure out what they were going to do. Maybe that's why Pentecost did not happen immediately, but took another ten days. Because the disciples needed to come to a place of embracing Christ's vision and making it their own.

This in-between time, between Ascension and Pentecost, is also an opportunity for us to examine our own lives of faith. To examine how we choose to live our lives of faith. As Brother Curtis Almquist of the Society of St. John the Evangelist so aptly notes: "These days of waiting between Christ's Ascension and Pentecost are about God's waiting on us: God is waiting, not for our ability but for our availability to receive the power Jesus intends for us." ("Brother Give us a Word" email, 5/19/23).

As we prepare for Pentecost in one-week's time, may we use this in-between time to reflect on our own lives of faith, to discern how God is calling us to respond, and to prepare ourselves for whatever the Holy Spirit has in store for us individually and as the Body of Christ in this place.