

Acts 1:1-11, Luke 24:44-53 Ascension of the Lord

Many departments of religious studies offer courses on the "Historical Jesus." Since the early 19th century, there has been a lot of interest in trying to use the methods of historians rather than religious scholars to see if the "real" Jesus can somehow be discovered. What prompts these outbursts of academic effort is stories like the Ascension, stories that are just too outrageous for educated, modern, cause-and-effect people like us to take seriously. According to some of the people who are intent on recovering the "historical Jesus," the church is encrusted with outdated, pre-scientific nonsense.

They will be quick to tell you that the Ascension never happened. It was a story, they say, that the church made up, based on even earlier stories in the Hebrew Scriptures of prophets ascending into the clouds. If you had been there with your camcorder with the disciples on that day, there would have been nothing to record, no feet of Jesus getting ever smaller as they rose away into the sky.

However, it's not a preacher's job to take the Bible's mysterious stories and make sense of them, to get rid of the strangeness or the wildness or the unpredictability. If a story is mysterious, then the church needs to practice being mystified, not jump as quickly as

possible to some explanation that removes all the shadows as well as the light.

The Ascension is not an easy day to preach. Luke is the only gospel that gives us an actual picture of the moment. In Matthew, the ascension is presupposed, as it is in John and Mark. Not everyone realizes that Luke gives us differing accounts of the Ascension! In the Gospel, Luke describes the scene differently than in Acts, most notably changing the event's timing.

In the Gospel, the Ascension appears to take place on the evening of Easter itself, whereas in Acts, 40 days have passed. When the scriptures provide two versions of the same story, there are often different theological insights brought into focus by each. They function differently in the narratives in which they are embedded, and they focus the reader's attention on distinct details and questions. Given its proximity to the events of Easter morning, the version of the ascension in Luke highlights the relationship between the ascension and Jesus' resurrection. Jesus' **person** is centred in the narrative. Acts, highlights the **relationship**, between the ascension, the nature and work of the church, and the promise of the Holy Spirit.

These topics are related in Luke and Acts. The work of the Spirit has

been intimately connected with Jesus' embodied presence from the start of Luke's gospel, so it is no surprise that these passages share significant similarities: Both call the disciples to wait in the city until "clothed with power from on high." Both describe a proclamatory mission to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem. And critically, both use the word "witnesses" to describe the disciples' identities. But if the emphasis in Acts is on the horizon and the significant changes that are coming to this small band of believers, the emphasis in Luke is on the continuity of God's faithfulness and the continuity in Jesus' person prior to and after the resurrection.

Luke speaks to the trustworthy character of God in Christ. Much has changed for the disciples on this Easter day, but the words that Jesus speaks on this monumental evening resonate with what he spoke to them prior, and significantly, these words also stand in continuity with "the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms." The new creation of Easter does not negate God's original creative, covenantal work. Luke uses the word "fulfill" to get at this continuity. This has significance for how Christians today understand their relationship to the promises God makes to Israel.

Jesus' disciples must have felt the earth slipping beneath their feet at the thought of being left alone ... again. It had been a roller coaster ride of emotions since they followed Jesus into Jerusalem;

hope, fear, death, and then the unbelievable presence of Jesus, no longer dead, but alive. But they knew he wouldn't stay. Indeed, Jesus speaks as though he's already gone: "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you ..." Isn't he still with them? His words must have seemed very confusing. Then Jesus opened their minds to understand the scriptures and interpreted the meaning of all that had taken place. He had done the same thing with two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Now, Jesus promises even more than scripture: "See, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high."

What did he mean? What was this "power from on high"? Jesus doesn't say "Holy Spirit" here, but he does in Acts: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth." This is the same Spirit that rested on Jesus at his baptism, the same Spirit that anointed Jesus to preach good news to the poor and freedom for the oppressed. This same "power from on high" would now be given to the disciples, and by extension, to us. This is a gift from beyond ourselves, not the same as "team spirit" or conscience or inner peace or anything we create on our own.

But how can we speak of something we have not seen? Could the Spirit be anything we imagine? In John's gospel Jesus compared the Spirit to the wind; you hear the sound of it, but you don't know where it comes from or where it goes. Though we cannot see the Spirit, we can see where the Spirit has been. There's a wonderful wood cut of Jesus' Ascension by Albrecht Durer. If you look closely at the picture, not up in the clouds, cut on the ground, you can see footprints on the earth. Durer has carefully outlined Jesus' footprints down on the level where the disciples are standing with their mouths open. Perhaps the artist was simply imaging a detail that isn't in the text. Or, perhaps, he is asking us, "Why do you stand looking up into the heaven?"

Look at Jesus and we will see where the Spirit has been: Jesus' feet carried him where others wouldn't go, brought him to tables surrounded by odd companions, gathered children on his lap, and questioned the disparities between the wealthy and the poor.

So, why do we celebrate the Ascension? Is it because it's forty-something days after Easter and that's what the church is supposed to do? We don't celebrate the Ascension because the creed says Jesus rose into heaven to sit on the right hand of God. We celebrate the Ascension because we're no different from the early church who gathered around this story from the beginning to

hear what they needed: the news that they were going to receive power. And perhaps even more importantly, we celebrate this day to be reminded that we have no power of our own and never had it.

There, the disciples were, a fragile little community, anxious and bewildered, watching their Lord leave them, but they aren't distraught and sad. When it's all over, they're worshipping with joy. They had an advantage over us. They knew they had no power of their own. Any power they would ever know would be given to them by the Spirit, and they aren't even told when or how.

Someone in the group does ask the practical question – someone in a group always does. He or she asks Jesus, "Are you going to restore the kingdom of Israel now?" It's not a faith question; it's a political question. It's the wrong question to be asking, but it's always all right with Jesus to ask the wrong question. "God knows the answer, but we don't get to know," Jesus says. "Stop worrying about having things the way you want them. Wait for something else, a power that is coming. A gift is on the way. Wait for it."

We live in an era and in a nation which is deluded by the notion that everything is up to us. To join a church is to stand up and challenge that idea. Whenever people gather around a baptismal font, they publicly proclaim that they rely on a power beyond themselves, that

they believe in God whose love and strength sustains them in all things.

A minister tells a story about a couple who came to see him with regard to possibly joining the church. He was excited about it, as any minister would be, until he felt the conversation turn into an interview. The couple wanted to know just what this Church was going to do for them and for their children. The pastor brought them to sudden silence by asking, "What are **you** planning to do for this Church?" They left in a hurry, never to be seen again. All ministry, including church membership, is a gift from Jesus Christ. Without the gift, without the empowering Spirit that Jesus promised to the disciples at his Ascension, we can do nothing. We can make no claim. And nothing that we try to do that is all our idea and not God's, can finally prosper in the end.

Our projects can certainly go a long way before they finally fade. A program or ministry or piece of polity that is our doing and not the Spirit's can look very successful and garner much support. But if something is not a work of the Spirit, it will die when our power or energy to make it happen dies. The work of the Spirit, on the other hand, never comes to an end. God will accomplish what God sets out to do and will make use of us and our witness along the way.

Ascension is the day to remember that it's the Spirit at work in the church that makes all manner of impossible things possible – things a good deal more mystifying than Jesus rising into the air. Things like the woman who knew she couldn't face it when her husband became critically and terminally ill, who woke each morning for months wanting to fall apart and disappear. But she didn't. She survived and met what came each day. And not only that, when she looks back, she knows she didn't do it alone because facing her husband's death was not something she could possibly have done alone.

By the power of the Spirit of God, a man who had been addicted to alcohol for more than half his years stopped drinking and stayed sober. And when people asked him how he did it, the first thing he says is he didn't.

By the power of the Spirit of God, a Mexican priest took communion to the people of a town, whose church was overrun with soldiers. They shot at anyone who came near, but the priest came forward to enter the church. They shot at the ground around his feet, and overcome with fear, he started to leave, but then stopped, came back again, and moved forward while the town watched. His courage, which was not his alone, inspired others to fall in step beside him – until there was a collection of unarmed people moving

toward the church. The startled soldiers no longer had the will to do them harm, so great was the complete helplessness of the power that was evident among them. So the soldiers stood aside and the people shared the communion; something that moments earlier had been impossible was now made possible by the power of God alone.

The Spirit that anointed Jesus anoints us, still breathes with us and surprises us, still reshapes the community called the church. If we forget and imagine that we're in this all by ourselves, if we trust only in our own efforts, we need to remember that it is by the power of God alone, that everything is possible!

May the power of the Holy Spirit, open our minds to the mystery of faith and the liberating word that the Gospel is still moving out through the simplest actions of people no different from us. Let us be thankful for the story of Jesus' Ascension and the freeing awareness that we can rely on a power beyond our own. May God bless the church universal, where our questions find welcome, where there is light for our darkness, and hope for things that would indeed be impossible if we had only ourselves on whom to rely.

Amen.

PRAYERS of the PEOPLE for JUNE 1, 2025

We give thanks that through your Ascension, Jesus, you are now set free to be Lord of all: no longer bound to a particular place or time, but with us always - able to reach even to the ends of the earth. For in your freedom, you have bound yourself to us with a promise: "Lo! I am with you always even to the very end of time."

Amazing God, we thank you for the wonder of Ascension, that marvellous yet mysterious moment in the life of the Apostles which left them gazing heavenwards in confusion, yet departing in joy.

Father God, like the Apostles, we too will never fully understand all that Ascension means. We accept, but do not fully understand. We believe, yet we have many questions. Help us, despite our uncertainty, to hold firm to the great truth that the wonder of Christ Jesus goes far beyond anything we can ever imagine, and in that faith may we live each day to his glory and honour.

We pray, Lord, for those who need to feel you close, who need the assurance of your love, the encouragement of your Spirit. We pray for those who are persecuted, who are discriminated against, who are mocked because of their faith, race or colour of their skin. Let your intimate love be known today by all who feel forgotten or lost, and all who are walking in the dark valley of despair: the unhoused, the lonely, those suffering from any addiction.

Open our hearts to love and to see that all people are made in your image, including our 2SLGBTQ IA+ siblings. Console those who have been hurt by unjust and cruel treatment. Help the world to accept and love them as they are, your precious, beloved children, as we celebrate June as Pride Month.

This month is also a time to recognize the rich history, heritage, resilience and diversity of First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples with whom we share the lands and waters of Turtle Island now named Canada. During National Indigenous History Month in Canada may we make an effort to learn more about the rich history of our Indigenous neighbours. We, the people of Grace, acknowledge with respect that we worship on the traditional, unceded territories of the Lekwungen people, the Songhees Nation and Esquimalt nation and Wasanec nation and are grateful for their longstanding and continued stewardship of God's creation. We seek a relationship with the inhabitants and guests of this land with a commitment to reconciliation and decolonization. Help us in our efforts to build mutually

respectful relationships that advance the ongoing work of truth-telling and reconciliation.

God of compassion, let your healing love be known this day by all who suffer distress of mind, agony of spirit, and physical ailments of body. Today we lift up in prayer the individuals or situations that need our prayers. Continue to pour your healing power on them to support and encourage them.

We pray for the communities and regions of the world experiencing the calamities associated with natural disasters caused by forest fires, flooding, house fires, cyclones and earthquakes, avalanches, drought or lightning strikes. Many have had their lives uprooted by evacuations of whole communities. As they experience the shock, terror, despair and great uncertainty about their future we pray that you provide them with the support and necessities to carry on one day at a time. Calm their fears, protect them, and all the first responders and emergency volunteers.

We pray for your church throughout the world that, it be true, engaging, and actively doing your will. We pray for Pope Leo XIV; for our Bishops Susan and Kathy, Bishop Anna, Anglican Primate Anne Germond; Grace Lutheran in Burnaby - Rev. Nathan Fong, Mount Zion Lutheran in Smithers; Doris Bieberdorf who is volunteering her services on the Mercy ship based in Madagascar; the congregations and Bishops of the Moravian Worldwide church; Bishop Azar and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, our sister congregation San Juan Camino d'Esperanza and their Pastor Ana Maria Jara; Holy Trinity Lutheran in Port Angeles. Bless the ministries of all pastors, priests, deacons, musicians and volunteers.

Fill us with your Spirit, Risen and Ascended one. Bring your kingdom near in our lives, that we might know you more, trust you more, serve you more fully. Fill us with your Spirit that we might be your hands and feet in the world, and in so doing, see you at work, and find ourselves drawn in, to the glory of your name, Risen and Ascended Lord.

Amen.

Our Father ...