

Ascension Sunday May 16, 2021 Psalm 47, Luke 24:44-53, Acts 1:1-11

What Would You Do?

Today's readings are attributed to the same author (Luke) about the ascension of Jesus after his crucifixion. When I started to research to prepare for this morning, it is noted that this is a less observed event in current times. In fact in the lectionary you can choose this Sunday as Ascension Sunday OR the seventh Sunday of Easter, with different options for Bible readings, etc. I mentioned to my daughter that I was preparing a sermon for Ascension Sunday and she said, oh yes, May 15th – I said well, close, the Sunday is May 16th this year. She replied, I just remember it from when I lived in France where it is a public holiday, and after some research I found that to be accurate, as it is in Germany and the Netherlands. The holiday is 40 days after Easter and 10 days before Pentecost, which makes it on a Thursday and this year it was May 13th. When asked what people do on this day, it was noted that while some go to church others share the time with family and often take the following Friday off for a long weekend. That sounds a lot like how we celebrate Thanksgiving.

We are usually taught the Bible in segmented stories; if someone had asked me about the end of Jesus' life on earth I would have repeated the Apostle's Creed: ...suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; the third day he rose from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty;

We know the story of Holy Week, the Last Supper, the crucifixion and the empty tomb but how does the Ascension of Jesus fit into this understanding and teaching? As I was reading about this from various sources, preparing for this teaching, I was reminded that Jesus did rise from the dead on the third day but he didn't actually ascend into heaven for 40 days after his crucifixion. The Apostle's Creed is a little misleading. But this raises more questions, such as why the 40 day time period and what did he do during these 40 days?

When the women went to the tomb and found the stone rolled back, they didn't know what happened. It might be reasonable to assume that the people who had crucified him had taken off with the body so the tomb could not be a focus for religious reverence. For many millennium, the various peoples living in Israel, in addition to the Jews, had worshipped many gods and the Romans currently ruling had many gods, a tomb for Jesus could be a focal point for religious

activity that would cause disruption in the order of the country on which both the Romans and the Jews had a tenuous hold.

We know the real reason Jesus wasn't in the tomb was because he had risen from the grave but didn't ascend into Heaven quite yet. He knew that his work on Earth wasn't done. He had to prove to the people – show them – that he continued to live, that there is life after death, but in a form that was different than what they could conceptually understand without proof. How many times in the Bible, from the very beginning of the Bible, has God had to make his presence known before people would believe? This is written as one of God's big frustrations – why don't people believe without being able to see and touch God in a form they understand? Other religions had idols that gave people something to see. God was and is asking us to believe in Him with faith, a deep and abiding faith that he is with us and we must follow what he tells us to do by faith.

Understanding the reluctance to believe, what did Jesus do during these 40 days to prove that he rose from the dead – that death was not the end but the beginning? And why 40 days? The number 40 days appears more than 100 times in the Bible – Noah, the years in the wilderness, the number of days Moses was on the Mount, Jonah and Nineveh, and the number of days Jesus was tempted by the devil to just name a few. Now the number appears again – it is not clear why the number 40 has significance, but it usually seems to be a period of time that is a transition from the beginning of something to a clearer understanding or the next phase.

After Jesus left his disciples, what did he expect them to do? They could have been in shock and not understood what to do next. In Acts 1:3 it says: *After his death, he presented himself alive to them in many different settings over a period of forty days. In face-to-face meetings, he talked to them about things concerning the kingdom of God. As they met and ate meals together, he told them that they were on no account to leave Jerusalem but “must wait for what the Father promised: the promise you heard from me. John baptized in water; you will be baptized in the Holy Spirit. And soon.”* And in Luke 24:45 *Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.*

Jesus spent those 40 days proving the truth of his resurrection and preparing his disciples for his departure. He appeared to Mary Magdalene, he walked with travelers on the road to Emmaus, he appeared several times to the apostles and many others. If he just disappeared from the tomb, how difficult would it have been to prove that he had truly risen and had not been taken away for political reasons.

He needed people to believe that the scriptures had been fulfilled and he wanted to make sure that the disciples believed deeply enough that he could trust them to take up the charge to continue his teaching. A Godly coming to earth is not a regular occurrence and not to be taken as something to be quickly forgotten. Jesus also needed to help the disciples in their work by appearing to others so more than the disciples saw and knew that it was true. Over two decades later, the Apostle Paul wrote that “he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living” (1 Corinthians 15:6). Jesus reminded the Disciples that they were not only witnesses to the work of Jesus but that they had entered into a trust with him to spread the word. This was a work they were all mutually responsible for.

So, what does this all mean to me, more than 2000 years later. So far it is a story, like many other stories of the Bible. We read the words of the Bible and think that the words are what happened then, and believe we are supposed to read them and understand that it happened – but to someone else. It is like watching a play or reading a book and imagining. I’ve mentioned before that there is a Book Club reading the Bible together and this has caused me to look at the readings in a very different way. Before this year I, personally, have been content to read the stories one at a time and not really link them together with the more mundane actions that happen in between the stories or to really get a relational time sequence for them. Actually, I’m realizing that this is a very passive, or “flat” way to understand the stories. I know the “players” and the details, but I don’t really understand them – I lose the context that the story I am reading has with all those that had gone before. To help me with the contextual issue I have been trying to mentally insert myself into the story as a minor “player.” You know how in a Bible story there are often several people mentioned by name and then it might say “and another woman,” who is not named. I am that unnamed woman who is observing. I try to imagine being there in that time and space imagining what I would be doing and feeling. So far in our readings starting from the beginning of the Bible I’ve gotten very tired and dusty by wandering the desert and I’ve

imagined the terror of the despair, the hunger, the wars, and the death. I've also been warmed by the joys the people have experienced and the depth of trust some have had in their relationship with God. (I had a very difficult time imaging being in the whale or on the ark but I tried!)

In one of the commentaries I read, Leon Morris notes: "The ascension differs radically from Jesus' vanishing from the sight of the disciples at Emmaus and similar happenings. There is an air of finality about it. It is the decisive close of one chapter and the beginning of another."

And I had to feel this....

As I place myself into the story as an observer – I reach for the sensory level and wondered how would I react to these events? The loss of Jesus through the tragedy of his death would have been like a black hole in my life. Who would lead me now? Through these 40 days I hope I would have understood that Jesus was telling me to keep moving forward and to make a transition from him being present in person teaching and guiding to trusting in what I had learned and to have enough faith that I would continue to be guided by that faith. Even though I may not be one of the 11 disciples left to spread the word, I was still a disciple, and as I cross back over to the present -- He expects me to carry his work forward 2000 years later. This is what the disciples learned and so did I. Actually, you are a disciple, too. He is telling us to make a transition to spreading the word without him being on earth and to have faith that he is with us.

When we make transitions in our lives they can be joyous, painful, depressing, or exciting. We can be wary or scared but we can also consider them a time of opportunity. Change is very difficult but change is what helps us grow, enriches our lives leads us to new adventures. We can choose to be negative or we can choose to be open. We can choose to trust that God has a plan AND we should step forward to see what that is. How can we trust that what is new is good or at least interesting? By trusting in God, deepening our faith, listening to and for God and knowing that God is with us. This is why Jesus spent 40 days to ascend – to ready us for the transition. As followers of Jesus, disciples, we are in covenant with Him to remember what he taught us, to reach out to others, to share His teachings, and to still continue to lean on the community of believers for support. But most of all He said in John 15:17 "But remember the root command: Love one another." Thanks be to God.

