

Ascension Sunday – Kaity Teer

Acts 1:1-11; Psalm 93; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53

Jesus' final moments on Earth are recorded in today's passages from Luke and Acts. In the last chapter of Luke, we read the ending of a narrative, but it is an ending with a promise. Like a good Blockbuster, the narrative leaves itself the possibility of a sequel. In the first chapter of Acts we read about the fulfillment of that promise and, consequently, the beginning of the church.

I have to confess: I have never spent much time thinking about the Ascension. I've thought a lot about Easter and Christ resurrected from the dead. I've thought about Pentecost and the power of the Holy Spirit. But somehow I've never really given the Ascension enough consideration.

The Ascension is surely important. These are Jesus' final moments on Earth – the conclusion of his Earthly ministry – and therefore it should be of great significance to us. We should care deeply about Jesus' last words of instruction to his disciples. Jesus departs after promising the Holy Spirit and commissioning the church. This is the transition from a focus on Jesus' life, death, and resurrection to a focus on the Holy Spirit empowering the church to spread the good news of the kingdom.

It's an extraordinary moment. In Luke's account, we're told that Jesus opens the minds of his disciples. In the Acts account, we're told that he spent the 40 days between his resurrection and ascension talking to them about the Kingdom of God.

I can't help but picture their minds like a jack-in-the-box – a few turns of the crank and, "Pop the disciples minds are opened." What did that really look like? Were their 40 days of conversations effective? Did they hash it all out so that the disciples could finally understand that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Scriptures? In Acts we see the disciples still not quite getting it in the moments before the Ascension. Jesus simplifies it for them with these parting words of summary: "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations"?

And then we read that Jesus promised the Holy Spirit, commissioned them to be his witnesses to all nations, blessed them and was taken by a cloud up to Heaven – which is extraordinary.

It leaves me with some questions about the logistics of it all. Where is Heaven and how exactly did he get there? It's a little strange to think about. Did he go straight up through the clouds like a NASA launch, or did he take a few turns and cross through space and time before arriving at the right hand of God?

The disciples are left with some questions. What is this promised Holy Spirit going to be like? What about Israel? And finally, the question that many people, including Harold Camping, have tried to answer, “When is Jesus coming back?”

Goodbyes are hard but I think they’re very important. I, for one, have never been very good at them. I think goodbyes are significantly harder when you’re saying goodbye for an indefinite period of time, when you don’t know when you’ll see someone again.

When I was little, my cousins – who lived four hours away, my sister, and I would do everything we could to postpone our goodbyes after a weekend visit. If only we could play for a couple more hours, or better yet, stay one more night together. Whether it was the disappearing glasses trick, “Mom, I lost my glasses. We can’t leave without my glasses.” Or, the disappearing Kaity trick: “It’s time to leave, but we can’t find Kaity.” We tried it all. On several occasions, I even tried to conceal myself in my aunt and uncle’s minivan but I never quite made it as stowaway.

Most recently we had a lot of family and friends in town for Austin’s graduation. One of his best friends had graduated in December and he returned to walk with his class, so he stayed with us. Austin’s parents came all the way from British Columbia to see him graduate and they stayed with us. My sister stayed with us; my parents stayed here in town, too. We had a great time eating together and celebrating. Then, the Monday morning after graduation we saw them all off. I must confess that as much as I enjoyed the fullness of our house and their company, there were moments during that weekend when I longed for a moment’s peace and quiet. But when all our guests had left, when we went back into our house it felt surprisingly empty.

You know that bittersweet moment after a loved one’s departure. Where you feel the sting of their absence so intensely because they were present with you just moments before. That eerily quiet feeling, like if you listen hard enough you might still be able to hear your mother-in-law fixing something in the kitchen. It’s almost as if for a few days your life expands to adjust to visitors and they become part of your routine and your daily meals and activities. It’s hard to picture going to back to live the way it was before they came. That’s what I picture the ascension to be like – that eerily quiet feeling of emptiness.

And that’s why it makes so much sense to me that we refer to the coming Pentecost as the disciples being filled with the Holy Spirit.

Surely Jesus’ departure left his disciples with this feeling of emptiness, and possibly confusion. In the Acts account the disciples are able to ask one final question, which reveals that they still misunderstand some key ideas about the kingdom of God. They ask, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” Jesus gently redirects their attention by commissioning them with the task to be witnesses to all nations. After 40 days of eating with him and celebrating his resurrection, Jesus leaves.

I'd imagine that they felt empty and thus rejoiced when they were filled with the promised Holy Spirit.

Jesus promises his disciples that they will not only be filled but they will also receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon them. This promise of power is especially significant given that the author of Luke and Acts is so concerned with the misuse power.

Luke's gospel begins with Mary's song of praise. "He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away." Over and over again, Luke's gospel shows concerns for those on the margins of society and promises that the Kingdom of God will be for them. In the blessings and woes of Luke chapter 6, for example. "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh."

Today's passage from Ephesians describes the antithesis of earthly power. We hear about the "immeasurable greatness of God's power." This power conquered death and exalted Christ far above all earthly powers. It's the same power that is available to the church to advance the Kingdom of God.

In this passage "riches" and "greatness" are redefined. The passage describes the riches that are the inheritance of the saints. Like the Israelites' promised inheritance of the Holy Land, the promised inheritance of all nations is the Kingdom of God.

We hear also about the "fullness of him who fills all in all." Those who are empty are at last filled.

This ending that is the Ascension is also a beginning. It is the end of Christ's ministry on Earth, but it is the beginning of the life of the church. Both begin with a baptism – one in water, the other in the Holy Spirit. It is the beginning of the present and future Kingdom of God.

N.T. Wright describes the Ascension in this way:

The Spirit is given so that we ordinary mortals can become, in a measure, what Jesus himself was: part of God's future arriving in the present; a place where heaven and earth meet; the means of God's kingdom going ahead. The Spirit is given, in fact, so that the church can share in the life and continuing work of Jesus himself, now that he has gone into God's dimension – that is, heaven. (The ascension is about just that: Jesus going ahead into God's sphere, against the day when heaven and earth become one and he is once again personally present in the new, combined, heaven-and-earth.)

Christ was so concerned with this present and future kingdom that that in Acts we are told Jesus spent 40 days with his disciples after his resurrection speaking to them primarily about the

kingdom of God. His parting words are about the kingdom, the promise of a different kind of power, and the church's role in bringing that kingdom to the ends of the earth.

In closing, I think it's only fitting to quote from the famous last words of a pop-culture prophet, the queen of daytime television, Oprah Winfrey. She made news last week as the final episode, the finale of her talk show of 25 years, aired. As she stood on stage alone, sermonizing, and struggling to recap what headlines have referred to as "The Church of Oprah Winfrey" or the "Oprahfication of America," she summarized the theme of the last 25 years of her show as this: People have the power to change themselves.

With all due respect to Oprah, I would say instead that the Holy Spirit is a gift that fills us with God's presence, that empowers us to change and not just change for ourselves, but to affect change for others and for all nations, that empowers us to join in and participate in the putting right of all creation.

Before she left the stage, Oprah's final benediction was this: "I won't say goodbye, I'll just say, 'Until we meet again.' To God be the glory." And with that she opened up the minds of her audience, blessed them, and a cloud took her out of sight.

I'm just kidding – that didn't really happen. But I do think those are fine last words and a pretty decent way to end a sermon. "To God be the glory."