

## E7B (Ascension) Luke 24:44-53 & Acts 1:1-11

I heard a few people this week make the joke that we call this month “May” because it may rain, it may snow, it may be 88 degrees, it may be 44 degrees; if you don’t like the weather, just wait a half hour, because it may be different by then. That is a pretty accurate description of what it has been like as I’ve been trying to find windows of time to hike with the dog that are not too hot nor too rainy; he minds if it’s too hot, I mind if it’s too rainy. So last week I spent a lot of time looking up, trying to guess whether the patches of bright blue sky or dark grey clouds were more likely to move in my direction. Then I got out the waterproof boots and a rain coat, because dealing with what is going on in real time down here is more practical than trying to guess what may happen up there; and that doesn’t just apply to the weather.

Luke is the only gospel writer who narrates the scene of Jesus’ ascension, which he does both at the end of his first book and then in a little greater detail at the beginning of his second book, as we read in reverse order today. It is from Luke’s timeline that we celebrate the Ascension 40 days after Easter, although that means it always falls on a Thursday; so we either go to church an extra day, move it forward or backward to a Sunday, or skip it altogether. Even if we don’t always give the Ascension its liturgical due, we really only think of worshipping the ascended Jesus. Although I’ve always served in these mid-century modern sanctuaries, if you’re in an older church with stained glass or a fresco at the front, you’re probably looking at Jesus, arms outstretched, ascending on a bank of clouds. Behind that door you can see that very depiction of Jesus from before this building was remodeled. I’d be interested if anyone remembers that renovation causing an argument, because apparently it was quite the scandal at the seminary when that chapel was remodeled and the picture of Jesus’ ascension was moved to the back wall to make space for more ranks of organ pipes. But with or without that image in front of us, we claim in the creed each week that Jesus ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father—he’s Up There now.

Luke tells us that Jesus spent the time between his resurrection and ascension showing the disciples that he was truly alive, teaching them more about scripture and God’s kingdom, and instructing them to wait in Jerusalem until they were gifted with the Holy Spirit, which would happen at Pentecost, the story we’ll hear next week. True to form, even after the resurrection, the disciples still don’t fully understand what Jesus is talking about; they want to know if Jesus is about to restore Israel’s political monarchy. They can’t see beyond what Jesus’ return from the grave might mean for them in their own time and place. But what Jesus wants them to do is to

witness to the whole world about his life, death, resurrection, and ascension. When Jesus returns to the Father and then sends the Spirit to equip the disciples for preaching, teaching, healing, baptizing, and serving, he becomes present to everyone everywhere, unlimited by time or space, which he couldn't have done if he had just kept walking around Judea. He goes to heaven not to escape this world but to make it possible for heaven to break into this world in new ways.

In that first chapter of Acts, Luke includes the detail that while the disciples are gazing up to heaven—while Jesus was still going—two men in white robes appear and ask: *Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking up toward heaven?* Luke intends for us to remember the two men in dazzling clothes who appeared to the women at the empty tomb who ask: *Why do you look for the living among the dead?* In both scenes, a seismic shift has occurred: Jesus was dead and now is alive; Jesus was on earth and now is heaven. I sympathize with the women and the disciples, who are right in the middle of these earth-shattering revelations, still trying to wrap their minds around what is happening. But the heavenly messengers urge them on: there is no time to stay stuck in the past, captive to their old understanding, when God is moving them forward and showing them something new.

However awe-inspiring the sight may be, the disciples can't stay staring up into heaven; the Spirit is on the way to gift them with the ability to accomplish what Jesus commissioned them to do: share the good news with the whole world. What the disciples have experienced—not just Jesus ascending to heaven, but all the times they listened to Jesus teach and preach, helped him heal and feed, even watched him die and rise—all of that was not just for their own private edification but was preparing them for the service that Jesus called them to do *in this world*. We as individuals or collectively as the church are rightly criticized when we spend too much time looking up to heaven, either worrying about what it will be like when we get there or waiting for Jesus to do what God has inspired, equipped, and called us to do here and now—when we are so focused on heaven that we are no earthly good. That last line of the Acts passage, *This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven*, paints a picture, echoed in other passages of scripture, of Jesus coming back in glory. But in the meantime, Jesus shows up in the same way the disciples saw him in life—in healing and forgiveness, in feeding and fellowship, in service and selflessness, in proclaiming release to the captives and freedom to the oppressed. We aren't called to look up, but to look out—out to a world that needs Jesus and needs us to be his witnesses with our very lives.