

Ascension B 2021 Acts 1:1-11 & Luke 24:22-53

I talk to my dog. The cats, too, but the dog is more responsive and seems to have a broader vocabulary, although if you ask him to bring you a ball, you may get a ball, or a stuffed toy, or the rubber thing you put peanut butter in to distract him long enough to leave the house without him making the sad Lab face. The concept he doesn't seem to understand is time. He gives me the same enthusiastic greeting when I return home after an hour at the store, after all morning here at church, or after a two week vacation out of the country. This means that I also have to be careful not to tell him that we're going on a W. A. L. K. as soon as I finish what I'm working on, or that we're going to camp (his favorite place) tomorrow or next week; he doesn't understand "just 20 more minutes" or what "tomorrow" or "next week" means, so he runs to the door expecting to leave right away. I'm not making this comparison to disparage the apostles as they stood, staring up to heaven after Jesus ascended, waiting for his return; but in spite of their eager enthusiasm, God was just not working a timetable they understood.

Technically the Ascension was to have been observed last Thursday, 40 days after Easter, because Luke tells us that was the time frame in which the resurrected Jesus appeared to the disciples: on the road to Emmaus, in the locked room first without and then a week later with Thomas, on the beach at breakfast when he asks Peter three times if he loves him, redeeming the three times Peter denied knowing him. However, in this time the eleven remaining disciples, the women, and Jesus' other followers are not yet witnessing to the world, as Jesus commissions them to do at the end of the gospels. Luke, who wrote both the Gospel that bears his name, the "first book" as he calls it, and the book of Acts, begins to refer to Jesus' followers as "apostles" which means "messenger" or "missionary" but they aren't sharing any kind of message or carrying out a mission. They are mostly hiding for fear of the authorities; in some accounts we see them returning to their previous employment. We don't yet see any evidence that this small group of Jesus' friends and followers will become of the body of Christ, spreading a message that will change the world.

After seeing Jesus feed crowds of thousands, restore sight to the blind, and raise the dead, his followers want to know what he is going to do next—and when. *Is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?* Even after his resurrection, the disciples are still thinking too small, still expecting a messiah in the form of a leader, probably of the military, who will fix their local political problems. Jesus tells them to stop focusing on *when*: *It is not for you to know the times...* but he also begins to prepare them for a different *what*: *You will receive power*

when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses... The disciples are waiting for what Jesus is going to do next; Jesus is preparing them for what *they* are going to do next.

Jesus promises the gift of the Holy Spirit, then ascends to heaven. The apostles keep standing there looking up after him, like they expect him to turn right around and come back. The messengers in white robes have to come and break their trance: *Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus will come in the same way you saw him go...* In other words, they aren't going to miss it, and they have more to do than to stand around waiting. The full name of the book of Acts is the *Acts of the Apostles*—as soon as they receive the Spirit, they are going to have their hands full witnessing to Jesus' life, death, and resurrection from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. They are still expecting Jesus to return to them physically; Jesus is about to join them spiritually to empower them for work that will reach beyond what they can expect or even imagine. The apostles think they need to see Jesus with them as he had been before; Jesus needs them to *be him* in new ways to reach new people.

We can see in scripture that Jesus' original followers and the first converts to the early church wrestled with the confusion of expecting Jesus' imminent return yet failing to see that happen generation after generation. We still spend a part of each liturgical year in Advent anticipation, waiting for Jesus to come again. But the message for us is the same as what it was for the first disciples: first, that it's not for us to know the time, and second, stop standing around looking up toward heaven. We don't know where we are on the cosmic timeline of the God who cannot be bound by our human concept of time. Jesus' first apostles seemed to think he would return after a couple of minutes; we're holding steady at a couple millennia. But in the meantime, we've got more to do than to just stare toward heaven; if all our focus is on when and where we're going to see Jesus again, we're missing out on what the Spirit is already doing in the world around us, and we're going to miss out on the work that *we* have been given to do here and now: being the body of Christ, witnesses of God's love to one another and to the world.

I'm fairly certain that when I leave the dog at home, after he finishes his peanut butter and notices I'm gone, he goes back upstairs and sleeps on my bed until I come back. That's really what I want him to do, since he used to use that time to eat my shoes. But we have been baptized and called to do more than take a nap until we see Jesus again, more than stand around looking toward heaven. May we faithfully use the power we've been given to be the body of Christ, to make God's love known in this hurting world for whatever time we've been given.