

The Ascension of Jesus
Acts 1:1-11
Ascension, Year C June 1, 2025
Choptank Charge Pastor Nan Duerling

Good morning, friends, and welcome on this day that we celebrate Jesus' ascension into heaven. Although this day is very important on the church calendar, it doesn't get the press that Good Friday, Easter, and Pentecost do. Part of the reason for that lack of attention is that Jesus' ascension never falls on a Sunday. It is celebrated forty days after Easter, so it normally falls on a Thursday. Then, ten days later, we celebrate Pentecost on a Sunday.

The story is told in Acts 1:6-11, but our lectionary reading includes verses 1-5, so we'll start there. The words "in the first book" refer to the Gospel of Luke. Most scholars have several reasons for thinking that the same person wrote both books. They use a similar style of writing and vocabulary, and they share a theological perspective. Luke 1:3 and Acts 1:1 indicate that both books are dedicated to Theophilus, whose name means "lover of God." This reference may be to an individual person, but some believe he represents a group of Jesus' followers. We really don't know, but we are sure that there is continuity between the end of Luke, which briefly tells about Jesus' ascension, and Acts 1. Luke tells the story of Jesus, while Acts moves forward, recording the events of Jesus' fledging church.

As Acts opens, we are at a transition point. Jesus has been crucified and resurrected per the story in Luke. Then, we read in Acts 1:2-5 that he has appeared during the forty days following his resurrection. He's not just "passing through," but rather, is continuing to teach his followers about the kingdom of God. We aren't told exactly what he taught, but we can surmise that he was preparing his disciples for the work they were to do without him.

In this section, Jesus gave his followers three instructions: The first concerns his teaching about the kingdom (1:3). The second, found in verse 4a, is that the disciples must wait in Jerusalem. The third direction is that they are to wait for the fulfillment of the Father's promise, as they will soon be baptized with the Holy Spirit (1:5).

Had I been one of the disciples, that command to "wait" would have been very difficult. I would have asked, "How long do you expect us to sit around here, Jesus?" They had no idea that they would need to wait just a

few more days, but each day must have seemed like an eternity. I am reminded of Puritan poet John Milton's sonnet, "On His Blindness," which ends, "They also serve who only stand and wait." Sometimes waiting is what we need to do. In his Covenant Prayer, John Wesley also prays, "Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee." We don't need to work all the time. Actually, sometimes waiting is all we can do. It can be an important time to get ready for what's to come. In the case of the disciples, they would not be fully prepared to undertake the mission to which Jesus had called them until the Spirit fell on them. We readers know that this will happen on Pentecost, ten days after Jesus' ascension, but they have no clue. In fact, Jesus told them that only God knows the time when the Spirit will come (1:7). Although they don't push Jesus further on this, they are eager to know when God is going to restore Israel (1:6). When will their nation be out from under the heel of the oppressive Roman government? Jesus doesn't tell them, because he apparently doesn't know himself. This is the Father's business.

We've all had times when we've had to wait for something. Maybe we're awaiting the birth of a child or grandchild, who arrives later than we had anticipated. Maybe we're waiting for a call back from an employer with whom we're hoping to get a job. Maybe we're on pins and needles, waiting to hear if the college we want to attend has accepted us. The list can go on and on, but my point is that we can easily identify with the disciples who had no option but just to wait until God's time was right.

What, then, can the disciples teach us about what we are to do in the meantime as we wait for God to act? Notice that they didn't just sit around wringing their hands. We learn that immediately following Jesus' ascension, the disciples return to the upper room where they were staying in Jerusalem. They were "constantly devoting themselves to prayer" (1:14). That's an important lesson! They aren't just moping. Nor have they decided that Jesus has gone for good, so they'll scatter to the four winds. No, they know what he has called them to do and they stand ready and waiting to respond to their marching orders when God says "go."

And what were these orders? Jesus has called us to be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. We can personalize this command by saying that we are to be witnesses in Cambridge, in Dorchester County, in Maryland, in the United States, and around the globe. Telling the story of Jesus—in word and deed—is how we live out his mission. And all that we do or say is undergirded by prayer.

I'll be honest. I would find it easy to be very stuck at this point. Jesus will no longer be with us, and yet he wants us to roam the world. On the one

hand, I've come so far with Jesus that as the old hymn says, there's "no turning back." On the other hand, I feel as if I'm in a long, dark tunnel with no light in sight at the end. This story from Rev. George Dillahunt reminds us that we can move forward if only we have the power...and know how to use it! The story goes like this, and I quote:

A lady who rented a Jeep to do some heavy work. Having been told that a Jeep could go anywhere, she drove down on the beach and got stuck in some soft sand. She raced the engine; but, instead of pulling out, the Jeep just got stuck further in the sand! She walked to a nearby garage to get a wrecker to come and pull her out.

The garage man explained to her that she did not need a wrecker; but, he went with her to show her what to do. He pointed to a gearshift lever that she had not noticed and explained that the Jeep had a pulling gear. He showed her how to operate the gear; and, the Jeep pulled right out of the sand. He then commented, "That lady thought she was stuck; but, she had more power than she realized—she just wasn't using it!"

When Almighty God created us, He gave us a "pulling gear!" We frequently encounter difficulties in life which stop our progress and hold us back! We get stuck in situations or circumstances; but, within each and every believer, there is a marvelous power that can keep us going—the Power of the Holy Spirit. We just have to allow the Spirit to take control of our lives. (end quotation)

The time for Jesus to talk with his disciples has now ended. His ascension is described in just three verses (1:9-11):

⁹When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.¹⁰While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them.¹¹They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

I added underlining here to point out the number of references to sight. Why, we wonder, would seeing Jesus be so emphasized? Recall the accounts of the resurrection. There was an empty tomb and some grave cloths, but none of the reports said that anyone actually saw Jesus being resurrected. While the empty tomb signifies that his body was no longer there, that doesn't prove that he was resurrected. Acts does record Jesus' encounters with many people over the forty days between resurrection and

ascension. According to Acts 1:9-11, the disciples are undoubtedly eyewitnesses to his ascension.

They physically see him ascending into a cloud. Clouds, of course, are in the sky, but they also are symbolically understood to be the presence of God. Recall that Exodus 13:21 tells us that God led the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt by a pillar of cloud during the day and a pillar of fire at night. In Exodus 19:16, God appears as a “thick cloud on the mountain” to give the people the Ten Commandments.

In addition to what they see for themselves, “two men in white robes” are suddenly standing beside them (1:10). Are these the same beings who appeared at Jesus’ tomb and spoke with the women? Could they be Moses and Elijah who were with Jesus on the mountaintop during his transfiguration? We honestly don’t know. But what we do know is that they give testimony to a fact that the disciples had no way of knowing: Jesus will return in the same way he was lifted into heaven (1:11). Their testimony gave the early church—and us—the hope that Christ would return at some undisclosed time. Charles Wesley wrote a hymn, “Lo, He Comes with Clouds Descending” (UMH #718). His interpretation of this momentous event is based on Revelation 1:7.

Again, we have explored an important biblical event that we have no way to replicate. So what do we do with what the first eleven verses of Acts tell us?

Clearly, we no longer have to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit. As we will soon celebrate on Pentecost, the Spirit came 2000 years ago. Yes, it had been here all along, as the Spirit is part of the Trinity. But the Spirit acted through certain people, such as prophets, in certain situations. At Pentecost, the Spirit became available to everyone, including us. When we are baptized with water, we also receive the Holy Spirit of fire. At that time, we are adopted into the family of God, the body of Christ.

We no longer need to wait, but we do, in fact, need to witness in word and deed, telling and showing strangers as well as friends what we believe about Jesus and how he has influenced our lives. We each have our own way of doing this. Jesus’ first disciples took off on missionary journeys to spread the word. I’m going to guess that most of us don’t feel called, especially at our ages, to pack up and head for a foreign country. So, what can we do?

We can certainly support those who feel called to be missionaries. Some of you are doing that by supporting the work of community missionary Shane Walker and the Overflow Café. Some of you provide meals for our unhoused neighbors at the shelter. Some of you bring family and/or friends

to worship.

Another way to witness is to speak directly to someone. More than 50 years ago, Craig and I were members of a United Methodist church where the pastor thought that standing in a nearby shopping mall, handing out tracts, was an effective way to witness. That worked for some folks, but we didn't like the idea of button-holing people, who were often in a hurry to finish their shopping, and trying to talk with them about Jesus. This "hey brother or sister, are you saved" model seemed like a real turn-off to us.

In my opinion, there are far better ways to witness. One way that I've found especially useful is to meet people where they are. When I first had my heart issues in 1996, I was asked to form a cardiac support group at our church. Members came, but so did folks from the community. It was not my job to preach to these folks, but in the course of our conversations, I could sometimes point out how I know God had been working in my life and, in fact, saved my life when I checked out on the operating table. I don't know how much impact that kind of testimony would have had on someone who was not familiar with scariness and uncertainty of heart disease, but my willingness to share opened the door for others to share how God had been working in them as well. The purpose of this group was to learn more about heart disease and how to manage it. At times, spiritual concerns arose that people talked about.

Witnessing can also occur when you share with someone about life experiences. One active couple in my former Sunday school class told us over the years how they had prayed that their son would be released from alcohol addiction. As I recall, the answer was 17 years coming, but man finally turned to God and felt strong enough to turn away from alcohol.

Sometimes people just start talking with us. They may have reached a dead-end in regard to some kind of burden they are carrying. Being willing to just be present and listen is a ministry of witnessing in and of itself. You may have no answers to them, but the fact that you took the time to listen can really make a difference.

We'll conclude by offering a rather simple challenge this week: Keep your eyes and ears open to situations where people need to hear a word from the Lord...and you are the person called by God to share a word of witness. You don't know who you can influence!

Love, Nan