

Epworth Chapel on the Green
May 20, 2012
Ascension Sunday
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Acts 1:1-11
Psalm 110:1-5
Ephesians 1:15-23
Luke 24:49-53

Today we celebrate one of the four great feasts of the Christian year as we commemorate the Ascension of Jesus. There are many places in the New Testament where Jesus' ascension is not really separated from his resurrection, and in the early church the celebration of Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension was an integrated event. (Cf. Rom. 1:4; 10:6; Phil. 2:9; Eph. 4:8-10; I Pet. 3:22; Heb. 4:14; 7:26; esp. I Tim. 3:16)

But in Luke's Gospel there is a tendency to separate the ascension from the resurrection, to make it a more distinct occurrence. Thus, the historical development of Ascension Day as a separate feast day in the church year might simply be a liturgical expression of a tendency we see early on in the New Testament itself, beginning with Luke.

In any event, the Ascension has gotten short shrift in recent years among many, due in part to criticism from those whose scientific world-view differs from the world-view of those in the first century. That ancient world view was a "three

storied” view of the universe: hell down below, earth on the main floor, and heaven “up there.”

Modern persons know that with our exploration of space we have rendered that old way of seeing things obsolete. But they then conclude, wrongly I think, that the Ascension could not have happened.

They are incorrect because in the final analysis the Ascension is not about where Jesus went *spatially*. The Ascension is about the fact that God finishes what he starts. And it is a *prolepsis* (i.e., a foretaste) of our own resurrection and our reign with Christ in glory.

Now, in Luke’s account of the Ascension here in Acts, the Ascension serves to set the stage for the birth and growth of the Church. It prepares us for the fact that a new chapter is about to begin. In this new chapter, Jesus will be present with the disciples in a *different* way.

Notice how Luke describes what is going to happen from Acts 1. First, Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit will come in power. Second, the disciples will be witnesses to the Easter faith (to Jesus’ resurrection). What is more, their testimony will spread through all the world, beginning first in Jerusalem.

And for all this to happen, Jesus must assume his rightful place at the Father’s right hand, taking his place of supreme authority over all things (as Paul reminds the Ephesians).

The Ascension, then, is a great “bridge” connecting Easter and Pentecost. It signals a climactic conclusion to God’s saving work, and shows us the promise that in his *absence*, Jesus is still very much *present* with us by the power of the Holy Spirit.

One other thing we should notice about Luke’s account here. Notice the disciples’ preoccupation with timetables, with trying to formulate an “end time” calendar for the ways of God: “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?”

And notice Jesus’ refusal to allow these speculations. “It is not for you to know,” he says. And then he tells the disciples something which all of us need to overhear this morning.

Essentially, Jesus says, “throw away your calculations and your calendars, and patiently wait for the Holy Spirit. Once the Spirit comes, you will be empowered to be my witnesses, to spread the Easter message everywhere you go. You need to quit speculating about when I’ll return, hunker down for the long haul, and do the work I’ve called you to do. Plan for the long haul, and rest assured that eventually I will return.”

This is precisely the message we need to hear today. As we prepare to embark upon the long season of Ordinary Time, or Kingdomtide, it will be our task to place ourselves once again in complete dependence upon the Holy Spirit, of

loving God and others in the daily, ordinary, rhythms of life. It's time to hunker down for the long haul, to wait patiently, and to live in the hope of Jesus' return.

As you come to the Lord's table this morning, come with faith. Come with gratitude that God finishes what He starts. Give thanks that Jesus has taken his place at the right hand of the Father, but has not left us alone to fend for ourselves. Open your hands and hearts to receive the grace he offers you. And give thanks.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.