

Ascension (Observed) 2020

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

May 24, 2020

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

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

The sequence of the books of the New Testament is slightly deceptive. It goes Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts. But Luke and Acts are really a two-volume set. By the same author. So maybe a better way to organize the New Testament would be Matthew, Mark, Luke, Acts, and then John. Because the traditional way puts the entire gospel of John between the last page of Luke and the first page of Acts. Maybe that's right, maybe that's not right. A big subject of scholarly debate.

Anyway, on the last page of Luke, Jesus ascends into heaven. And on the first page of Acts, Jesus ascends into heaven. It reminds me of how some television shows begin by showing the important parts of the last episode. "Previously on Madame Secretary." "Previously on Lost." And you get a little recap. To a certain extent, the Ascension is the bridge from one book to the other. The oddity of this worship service is that the lectionary assigns both stories to us to hear and to read together. So Jesus ascended in the first reading, from Acts. And then Jesus ascended again in the gospel reading, from Luke. The biblical order is reversed. But we get the same story, twice.

Today I propose that since the story is told twice in the Bible, it has two different meanings. One meaning in the Gospel According to Luke. And the other meaning in the Acts of the Apostles. The Gospel is the story of Jesus. Acts is the story of the Church, led by the Holy Spirit. The Gospel is about the second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ. Acts is about the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, and the apostles, deacons, witnesses, and the spread of the Good News and the development of the early church. What the scholars call "primitive Christianity." Acts is about the Church. That's why our own church building has a Bible verse from today's first reading inscribed over our pulpit. From verse eight: "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses."

The Ascension according to Acts is very much the prologue to the arrival of the Holy Spirit. Which we commemorate next Sunday, Pentecost Sunday. The second person of the Trinity exits, so that the third person of the Trinity can enter. When what appear to be two angels appear, they ask, "*Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards 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.*" Although this is commonly understood to refer to the return of Jesus— the Second Coming, the

parousia, judgment day— it could possibly refer to Jesus returning as the Holy Spirit. Because when the Spirit arrives at Pentecost, in the next chapter, Acts says that it came “from heaven.”

The Ascension according to Acts plants the Church very firmly on the ground. The two angels are standing on the ground, not soaring in the sky. The sentence that is posted over our congregation’s pulpit continues: *You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.* You can almost look down and see a map. Jerusalem to the surrounding Judea, the adjacent Samaria, then to the four corners of the earth. This is very much on the ground. Terrestrial. The focus is the Church’s mission in the world. So a proper sermon for the Ascension according to Acts would very much be a sermon about the mission of the Church. About discipleship. It would be about our work in the world. “Don’t look up! Look around!” Those are the kinds of lessons that we can draw from the Ascension according to Acts.

[Whereas] In the Gospel version of Ascension, I think that the author— the same guy, Luke— has a different meaning. It’s the culmination of a book about Jesus, and I think it makes a couple of important points about Jesus. Continuity. And validation.

The first point is continuity. Luke believes that Jesus is the product, the fruit, of Judaism. The Gospel According to Luke, which is the longest book of the New Testament is a very finely crafted masterpiece. You may not recall that Luke begins in the Jerusalem Temple. It’s the event that we call the Annunciation of John the Baptist. Zechariah— who is a Levitical priest, of the tribe of Aaron— who has the name of an Old Testament prophet— Zechariah is in the temple when Gabriel appears to him and announces the miraculous birth of a son. For most Christians, the Annunciation to Zechariah is vastly overshadowed by the Annunciation to the virgin Mary, which follows later in chapter one. But the gospel begins not in Nazareth, not in Bethlehem, but in Jerusalem. In the temple. And in today’s gospel, the book ends with the disciples in the temple in Jerusalem. *“They were continually in the temple blessing God.”* And some of the ancient manuscripts add, “Amen.” The Gospel of Luke literally begins and ends in the Temple. Jesus is a Jew. Jesus is a Jewish event. Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings, Or as we have it in today’s gospel, “law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms.”

It is not too remarkable that the gospel of Matthew stresses Jesus’ connection to Judaism. But Luke is a Gentile Christian, writing to Gentile Christians such as Theophilus— that’s a Greek name, not a Jewish name— and writing after the Temple had been destroyed. That Luke goes so far out of his way to emphasize the Jewishness of Jesus is remarkable. The word for this is *continuity*. Jesus is not something new and different. He is the continuation and fulfillment of the Judaism that is indicated by the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings, and that was centered in the Jerusalem Temple. Continuity. At the culmination of Luke, we come full circle to the temple. The Jewish temple Continuity.

And the other aspect of Luke’s presentation of the Ascension is validation. Most of the great hymns and prayers on this day speak of the enthronement of Jesus. He sits at the right hand of

the Father. It's royal imagery. Crown him with many crowns. As our reading from Ephesians puts it today: *"Far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come."* Jesus is elevated. It is God's pleasure and affirmation of Jesus. It is *validation*. The verb *ascend* implies that Jesus actively ascended. The Creed says, "He ascended into heaven." But that's not what Luke says. The verbs that Luke uses in his gospel and in Acts are "taken up." Jesus is the passive recipient of the verb. The actor is God the Father. Jesus is being lifted up to a place of honor. He doesn't just climb up and take it. He is elevated. He is validated.

But what was validated? What was validated is the Jesus that we have come to know in the 24 chapters of Luke's gospel, the longest of the New Testament books. The Jesus of the poor and the outcast and the marginalized. The Jesus who associates with tax collectors and harlots and unsavory kinds of people. Above all, as our gospel reading states today, a savior who was to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day. And what suffering. Luke is the one who describes the humiliating dialog with the two criminals, crucified on Jesus' sides, one of whom says, "Remember me in your kingdom." Luke's Jesus is the Jesus of good news. The one who lives out the words of Isaiah, *"I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness."*

This is what is lifted up. This is what is enthroned. This is what is validated. The persistent and unconditional love of God that breaks down barriers, makes justice in an unjust world, and overcomes sin with mercy. The entire 24 chapters of the New Testament's longest book. That is what is true, that is what is lasting, that is what is worthy of God, this is honor and beauty and power. The Ascension as validation. God has taken this up to himself, on high, validating it once and for all. In the words of the sixth century poet, Venantius Honorius Fortunatus:

*He who was nailed to the cross
is ruler and lord of all people
All things created on earth
sing to the glory of God.
Daily the loveliness grows,
adorned with the glory of blossom,
heaven its gates now unbars,
flinging its increase of light.*

[Hail Thee Festival Day, ELW #394]

Christ has been lifted up. Our hopes, our thirst for justice, our need for mercy, our sorrows and suffering are lifted up and are now lodged in the life of heaven itself. Alleluia! Amen.