

Ascension 2021 (Observed)

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

May 16, 2021

Acts 1:1-11; Luke 24:44-53

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

Dear Friends:

We have two readings today by the same author. The story of Jesus' ascension is told twice by the same author. Luke puts the ascension at the end of his gospel. And he puts it at the beginning of the book of Acts, which Luke also wrote. *"In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven."* In the first book, Theophilus. That would have been the gospel. And now the second book. Given the way that we worship, we messed up the sequence. The second book was read as our first lesson. And the first book was read as our gospel. This is why most of us need coffee before we go to church.

The Ascension of Jesus is not entirely a settled matter. The question is where is Jesus now? It's more complicated than you may realize. He is risen. He lives. Yes, he lives. But where and how? Is he in the believer's heart, for example? Is he in the bread and wine of holy communion, for example? Is he still flesh and blood, or did he just have a human body for those thirty years that he walked on earth? He sits at the right hand of the father, the Creed says, based on numerous statements in the New Testament. What does that mean, exactly, at the right hand. It sounds important. The whereabouts of Jesus matter because his whereabouts tell us something about how we relate to him now. Jesus is sometimes called our great high priest, for example, because he intercedes for us— meaning he carries our prayers— to God the Father. Where is Jesus now? It's more complicated than you may realize.

Luke has definitely got the opinion that Jesus is in heaven with God the Father, and that what remains on earth below is the Church and the presence and guidance and power of the Holy Spirit. And that's why the Ascension is carefully delineated by Luke, and the story is told twice. It is the conclusion of one era, and the beginning of a new era. The Immanuel of Jesus Christ, God with us becomes the Immanuel of the Holy Spirit, God with us in *that* special way. It's no coincidence that the story of Pentecost, which we celebrate next week, is also told by Luke. It's no coincidence that verse eight from our first reading is written out over the pulpit at Dove of Peace Lutheran Church. Luke sees this as a pivotal point. Jesus lives in heaven, but we live on earth. And we have work to do. *"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."* Don't stand around staring into the sky. You are Jesus' witnesses to go to the ends of the earth! And the Holy Spirit is going to equip you for that work. Luke has a very structural understanding of the Ascension. He delineates it very clearly, intending it to be very

instructive for us, the people Luke calls disciples and Christians.

However, Luke is not the only point of view in the New Testament. He's very influential, and rightly so, but his view isn't the only one. The Gospel of John has a different view. The Letter to the Hebrews has a different view. Revelation has a different view. It's not because the Christian faith is divided. But it's because people have different experiences of Jesus, and what he means. And his whereabouts are important for how we relate to him.

Now our second reading today is from this glorious letter of Ephesians. This weird but glorious letter that claims to be written by Paul, although plenty of smart people doubt that. Ephesians makes me squirm because it is very hierarchical, and it justifies sexism and slavery. Or at least Ephesians has been heavily relied upon by those who want to justify sexism and slavery. But that's applying Ephesians incorrectly and unjustly and harms the main message of Ephesians. Which is written for people like me, people who are Christians but just aren't completely all we should be and all we want to be. Ephesians says that we are on our way to something good and complete, but we're not smart enough or powerful enough or good enough to understand. But Ephesians thinks that we are on our way to being smart, to being powerful, to being wise. It says today, "*I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints.*" The author is praying that God will give us a spirit of wisdom and revelation. That we will come to know God better. That the eyes of our hearts will be enlightened. And that we may know the hope to which we have been called.

Now that right there is why I'm glad I came to church today. We are called to hope. Imagine that. We always hear about and sing about Jesus calling us. We always hear about and sing about hope. But what about this? We are called to hope. In fact, according to this, we don't even fully understand what we can hope for. It's in the future. To know the hope to which he has called you.

Now our reading today is from the opening chapter of Ephesians. It's in chapter four, which we don't read today, that the author talks about the Ascension. *When it says, 'He ascended', what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.* So Ephesians literally turns Ascension on its head. He didn't just ascend. He descended to the lower parts of the earth— perhaps hell— all as part of this unifying work of Jesus Christ. He's permeated everything and been everywhere in the cosmos. He's got the wisdom and the power and the hope and even though we have not yet grown fully into that, we can and we will. And that's the meaning of the Ascension in Ephesians. The things of heaven are things that we can partake in because Jesus has unified and connected what's above with what's below. He not only ascended, he descended.

I said at the beginning that we had two descriptions of the Ascension today, both of them by the same author Luke. I also said that what people say about the whereabouts of the living Jesus tells

us something about how they think we might relate to the living Jesus. Luke said in his gospel today that Jesus was carried up into heaven. But Luke said in Acts today that a cloud took him. A cloud signifies the presence of God, a God who is unseen and shrouded in mystery. The God, for example, of Mount Sinai. For its part, the little letter of Ephesians tells us that the Ascension is part of how Jesus unifies and holds together both heaven and earth, keeping us connected to the heavenly possibilities. When we perceive that there is more to life, when we tingle with possibility, when we feel frustrated by our own limits, when we experience what the poet Wordsworth called “intimations of immortality,” Jesus is the one who spans both the mortal world and the immortal world. Jesus is the one who meets us in our little piece of reality while owning the much larger reality. And that means that we can know the hope to which we have been called. One of the meanings of the Ascension of Jesus is that I am called to hope. You are called to hope. Amen.