

He Ascended...

Do you have a favorite TV series you really like to watch? To find out, bit by fascinating bit, how the story unfolds? If so, you know that each show follows the previous one in sequence. At the end of this week's show, you catch a preview of what's going to happen on next week's show—a "teaser" to get you to tune in the following week. Then, when you do tune in the next week, right at the beginning you get to see a flashback, a reminder of what happened at the end of the previous episode. So, often, the same event will be featured at the end of one episode and at the beginning of the next, linking these two chapters of the narrative.

And this technique of story-crafting has been around for a while. It's even in the Bible! Most interpreters believe that the Gospel according to Luke and the Acts of the Apostles are actually volume one and volume two of a work by the same author. This Luke, this master writer, ties the end of his Gospel to the beginning of Acts with one event that appears in both of them: the ascension of Jesus Christ.

Luke's Gospel concludes with the ascension. And the Acts of the Apostles picks up where the Gospel leaves off, with the ascension account we read today. For Luke, it's *the* watershed event. Because everything preceding it is about Jesus on earth. And everything after it is about Jesus' followers in a world in which Jesus is no longer physically present. The ascension connects the before with the after. The ascension carries great significance for Luke. And for early Christians, too.

We know that, because the creeds they formulated have come down to us. In a little while, when we confess our faith, we'll join in the words of one of these historic creeds. You're intimately familiar with the belief statements it makes about Jesus: *He was born...he was crucified...he was raised from the dead...he ascended into heaven.* You may have noticed that our oldest creeds place the ascension right up there on a par with the incarnation, the passion, and the resurrection.

The Christian year—and rightfully so—has entire *seasons* in which we anticipate the coming of Emmanuel, God-with-us; in which we journey with Jesus to the cross; in which we celebrate the truth that God has raised him from the dead.

But the departure of Jesus from this earth? His ascension into heaven? Because it comes forty days after Easter, Ascension Day actually falls on a Thursday. But since we're not usually here together on a Thursday, we—along with many other United Methodist congregations—observe the ascension on the following Sunday. This major celebration of the church gets—at best—one Sunday. That's why I'd like to reflect on it with you during this time together.

So what's the ascension all about, anyway? Two thousand years later, what difference does it make in your life and mine? Perhaps a good place to begin considering these questions is with the eleven—with those first followers of Jesus. Because in many ways, we are so like them.

Luke tells us that during the forty days since his resurrection, the risen One has been appearing to his disciples and talking with them about the kingdom of God. Now the kingdom of God is at the heart of the message that Jesus comes proclaiming. It's the very core of his teaching. But for those closest to him, being around Jesus in a physical, human way is coming to an end. These who have seen and heard and touched have been with him a long time and have received his

instruction on the nature of this kingdom. Yet they still don't understand. They still don't get it.

We know this because of the question they ask him: *Master, is this the time when you're going to restore the kingdom to Israel?* The kingdom they're hoping for is an earthly one. They're longing for the day when the nation of Israel will be like it was in the glory days of a bygone era. Like Israel was in the time of King David and King Solomon. For the eleven, it's all about their own nation.

They have not yet grasped the reality that all of Jesus' followers across time and space need to understand: that the blessing of God revealed in Christ is not for one nation alone. That this Jesus we worship and serve is Lord, not of one nation only but of *all* nations. At his birth, an angel declares his Lordship. Although the Caesar of empire declares *himself* lord, his claim is refuted. Jesus is Lord.

But Jesus' disciples, while they are with him, don't comprehend a lot of things. They don't seem to understand the nature of time. He states clearly that time belongs to the One he calls Father. Have you ever made plans to do something at a particular time, only to discover that God had a different plan for

you? According to Jesus, times and seasons are not for you and me to know. That's why, when we human creatures try to predict what will happen in the future, we're usually incorrect. Instead, we're asked to wait until God's promise is fulfilled—in God's own perfect time.

In the fullness of God's time, Jesus ascends. And is taken up into a cloud—into the presence and the power and the love of God.

But people react to Luke's report of the ascension—and to other biblical accounts of the miraculous—in different ways. At one end of the spectrum are those drawn only to the Jesus of history—those for whom the ascension is nothing but a fanciful tale conjured up by the early church, rooted in ancient legends of prophets being taken up to heaven. And impossible because it defies the laws of physics and the forces of gravity.

The third president of our country, by the way, was in this group. He created his own Bible by literally cutting out each miracle account and every allusion to the divinity of Jesus. And keeping what was left.

At the other end of the spectrum are those who tend to focus primarily on the miracles themselves, to the exclusion of

much else in the life and ministry and teaching of him who came in human flesh.

It seems to me that Christians at both extremes miss out on a great deal of the underlying richness of God's word—and on the meaning of the ascension for you and me today.

Luke discloses that after Jesus is gone from their sight, eyewitnesses are startled by the appearance of two white-clad beings. The very ones who were at the empty tomb! They question the eleven: *Why are you guys staring up into heaven?*

Now what do you think? Is that kind of an odd question for us in the church to be hearing? Why *shouldn't* we who follow Jesus be looking up toward heaven, envisioning heaven as a beautiful and wondrous place? Especially after we're told that he's going to come back in the same way we saw him go? Especially when God's messengers have offered the certain assurance of Christ's return?

The thing is, beloved, when you're gazing up into heaven, you can't see what's happening on earth. You can't see what needs to be done. You can't see those who are hurting. You can't see the brokenness of a world in desperate need of healing. You can't see where injustice needs to be confronted and a word of

peace needs to be spoken. You can't see the work that Christ is calling you to do—the work he has begun and is calling *you* to continue.

Just as he calls his first disciples to continue that work. But now that Jesus is about to leave them, they're no longer called disciples. They have become his apostles. An *apostle* is one who is sent. Just as those eleven apostles were sent.

Luke tells us that before Jesus ascends, he prepares those *first-century* apostles to be in ministry. Those who have experienced the physical presence of Jesus.

You and I don't have the physical presence of Jesus like they did. But in this holy book, we *do* have his words. And with these words, he prepares his *twenty-first century* followers to be in ministry. He has chosen us to carry on his work! When he returns, he expects to find you and me *doing* that work.

We—as baptized Christians—are to be about the work of ministry! With our hearts, with our hands, with all that we are, we proclaim the good news of a coming kingdom. We are the church, and this is our mission that reaches out to others in our midlands communities, in our state, in our nation, and around the world.

For these final words of Jesus echo in our ears today: *in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, you will be my witnesses*. As he departs, he sends each one of us to be his witness. Because if you believe that Jesus Christ is your Savior, then you have a story to tell—the story of how he came to *be* your Savior! You are called to tell that story, and to tell it with confidence that you will be given the words you are to speak.

You and I are called to walk out these doors and to testify with our lips and with our lives to who we know Jesus to be. To tell those who have never heard, about this risen and ascended Lord.

For you and I *have* heard. We have heard good news! We have been blessed—truly blessed. And so this day we rejoice and celebrate. For the ascension confirms your belief and mine that the Jesus of history *is* the Christ of faith.

This Jesus who ascended is the Christ, enthroned forever. He is the One who sits at the right hand of God in the heavenly places. He is the One who is far above all earthly rule and authority and dominion. He is the One whose name is exalted above every name.

For he is the One the grave could not hold! He is the One who has triumphed over death! He is the One who is everywhere present, who lives today and tomorrow and always. He is the One who bestows grace and forgiveness in the power of the Holy Spirit. He is the One who fills all things. Christ Jesus is the One who reigns in this age and in the age to come.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.