

Stretching Toward Sunday

Thoughts, readings and reflections
based on this week's lectionary readings

May 30, 2019

Ascension of the Lord, Year C

The readings this week:

- Acts 1:1-11 ◦ Psalm 47
- Ephesians 1:15-23 ◦ Luke 24:44-53

[Click here to read this week's Scriptures](#)

Why are You Looking Up?

They say that the first sentence of a novel is the hardest to write. The first thing is to avoid the hackneyed start: *It was a dark and stormy night...* But endings are even more difficult. The question is, how to end a long story? George Orwell ended *1984* ominously: "He loved Big Brother." Virginia Woolf ended her novel, *To the Lighthouse*, with "Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision." Perhaps the most suggestive ending for today is the last line of Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable*: "...you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on."

For Luke, the ascension is the last line of the Jesus story, for it is where his gospel ends. It occurs to me that, in over four decades of preaching, I have preached very few sermons on the ascension. I suppose that is because I have always seen this strange account of Jesus' rapture into heaven as strangely otherworldly—especially for the normally worldly Luke. Was the ascension a literal event, or was it the only way Luke could imagine Jesus' departure? After all, you couldn't have the Christ riding into the sunset, Lone Ranger style, with the bystanders asking, "Who was that masked man?" You couldn't have Jesus die at the end of the story, for he had already died once and defeated death. And so Jesus floats upward, presumably toward heaven.

Moreover, it is an uncomfortably strange text, and that's probably why I've shied away from it. Even biblical scholar William Barclay, thinking of all the strange artistic depictions of the ascension, wrote, "No one has ever succeeded in painting a picture of the Ascension which was anything other than grotesque and ridiculous." The ascension is hard to depict in art, let alone in sermon.

Actually, although Luke treats the ascension as the end of the gospel story, a second telling actually begins his next book, the book of Acts. His chronology is even different; in Luke the ascension takes place on Easter afternoon, just after the encounter on the road to Emmaus. But in the first chapter of Acts it takes place forty days *after* Easter. Be that as it may, perhaps Luke is telling us something important about Jesus' departure: that it is *both an ending and a beginning*.

The ascension is, of course, an ending. I think of Salvador Dali's stark portrayal, in which all you see of

Jesus is his feet, from the perspective of the onlookers. Those feet that walked the dusty roads of Palestine will not walk the earth again. The feet so lovingly anointed just before the crucifixion will no longer carry him to the sites of miracles and healings. This is goodbye. The Jesus story in Luke's gospel comes to an end.

And yet...turn to Acts, and the same scene, with albeit different timing, is the beginning of another story—the story of the church. Now Luke seems to take a different tack, turning worldly again. Now the emphasis is on *what to do now*. In both scenes, Jesus "opens the scriptures," just as he had done for the two followers on the road to Emmaus, giving final instructions. But in Acts, when his disciples ask about the schedule of future events, Jesus reminds them "It is not for you to know the times..." The implication is that the business of the fledgling church will not be to indulge in speculation about the *eschaton* (as too many religious groups still do), but to get about the continuing work of the kingdom.

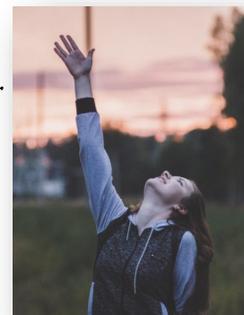
It's notable that after Jesus is "taken up" in a cloud and the Acts onlookers stare at those ascending feet, two men in white appear (I wonder if they are the same men who showed up in Luke's version of the resurrection with their question, "Why do you seek the living among the dead?"), and say, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" These angels ask hard questions! The implication is, *Don't just stand there, do something!* And so the story of the church begins.

So the ending is also the beginning. The rapture of Jesus is, like Pentecost, a birthing of a very worldly church, which is called not to simply stand there, looking up, but to get about the work that Jesus began. The Spirit-empowered church is to be the continuing presence of the Christ in the world.

Endings and beginnings—life is full of both.

*In our end is our beginning; in our time, infinity;
In our doubt there is believing; in our life, eternity,
In our death, a resurrection; at the last, a victory,
Unrevealed until its season,
something God alone can see.*

~ Blaire R. Monie, [Patheos](#)



___ 1st Reading: [Acts 1:1-11](#)

Worship



Luke commences Acts with a reference to the “first book” – what does he mean? As we read the introduction to Acts, what gives credibility to this report? How does Jesus spend the forty days between his resurrection and ascension? What is the significance of this and what is Jesus’ plan for people to hear the good news? Whilst some people doubt Jesus’ resurrection – do you have more confidence with the knowledge that Jesus appeared to many people over a lengthy period (i.e., forty days)? What did it mean for the disciples to be witnesses? Do you think we are witnesses too? Does anything get in the way or distract us from fulfilling this crucial role? How are we also equipped? Just as it was important for the disciples to see Jesus taken up into heaven (for then they knew without a doubt that he was God and was home in heaven interceding for us), how is the knowledge of the Ascension significant to us as Christians today? [Anglican Church of Noosa](#)

___ Psalm Reading: [Psalm 47](#)

When was the last time you really sang praises to God? What caused you to sing to Him? What are all you peoples (or nations) called to do? Why? What proof does the psalmist present that God is “awesome” and a great King over all the earth? The Psalmist tells us 4 times to sing praises to God. What is the reason for the singing of praises here? Who are the people of the God of Abraham? Are you among the people of the God of Abraham? If so, what gives you this assurance? [Monday Night Bible Study](#)

See how the Church invites us, in her liturgy, to celebrate with gladness this exaltation of her Bridegroom, our God and our Redeemer....

"I ascend to my Father and to your Father, to My God and your God." Jesus has but gone before us: He does not separate Himself from us, He does not separate us from Him. If He enters into His glorious Kingdom, it is to "go and prepare a place" for us. He promises to come again one day to take us to Himself, so that, He says "where I am, you also may be." Thus, we are already, participants in the glory and bliss of Christ Jesus; we shall be there one day in

reality. *Volo, Pater, ut ubi sum ego, et illi sint secum. (Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am; that they may behold my glory, which thou hast given me: for thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world.)* ~John 17:24. What power in this prayer, and what sweetness in this promise! Let us then give ourselves up to this intimate and wholly spiritual joy.



~ Columba Marmion OSB,

Praying Toward Sunday

Risen and ascended Lord Jesus,
When we are numbed by the suffering of the world,
Take us back to the deep truth
Of your power and glory,
Of your invincible Kingdom,
Of your promise of reconciliation.
In the knowledge of this truth,
Help us to bring our gaze to earth
And find the strength to go into the world,
to do your will on earth as in heaven.
To build the kingdom of God
On earth as it is in heaven.

~ [Christian Aid](#)

___ 3rd Reading: [Ephesians 1:15-23](#)

What had Paul heard about these believers? For what does Paul pray in these verses? Why is knowledge of God so important for believers? In addition to giving thanks, Paul prays that God would give them a “spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him.” Who or what is the source of wisdom which leads to this knowledge? Paul asks that the eyes of their heart may be enlightened so that they may know three realities. What are they? What is the “hope” to which we have been called? What is the “inheritance” to which Paul refers? Is it God? Is it us? Paul goes on to pray that we will know the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. How has God demonstrated His power? What does Paul want them to understand about God’s power? What does Paul want us to understand about the nature of God from this passage, as well as His heart for believers? [Cru Community](#)

___ 4th Reading: [Luke 24:44-53](#)

What does Jesus want his followers to understand? How does he help them understand? When have you experienced a similar “breakthrough” in Bible study? Jesus lets his followers in on their role in the continuing fulfillment of the Scriptures. What will be involved immediately in being witnesses? What do you expect their “job description” to be once they are empowered by the Holy Spirit? Imagine the parting scene in verses 50-51. What would a blessing from Jesus mean to you if you were there? How do Jesus’ followers respond to their last interaction with Jesus? Why worship? Why obedience (returning to Jerusalem)? Why joy? How does the joy in verse 52 differ from the joy in verse 41? Reflect on a time when you’ve felt this way. How did Jesus’ followers change from verses 37-43 to verses 52-53? What was the process? How have you seen Jesus use the same progression to prepare you to be his witness? What do you need more of in order to take your place joyfully in God’s plan to preach “repentance and forgiveness of sins in his name to all nations”? [InterVarsity](#)