

“Ascension”

Acts 1:6-14; Ephesians 1:15-23; John 17:1-11

May 28, 2017 -- Ascension Sunday

Acts 1:6-14 (NRSV) So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" {7} He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. {8} But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." {9} When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. {10} While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. {11} They said, "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." {12} Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. {13} When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. {14} All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

Luke 24

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. ⁵¹While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.^{*} ⁵²And they worshipped him, and^{*} returned to Jerusalem with great joy; ⁵³and they were continually in the temple blessing God.^{*}

John 17:1-11 (NRSV) After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, {2} since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. {3} And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. {4} I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. {5} So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed. {6} "I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. {7} Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; {8} for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. {9} I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. {10} All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. {11} And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.

It's a great and important story and it gets told twice in the New Testament. And Luke does the telling both times. At the end of the gospel according to Luke and here at the beginning of Luke's telling of the early days of the Church in Acts – Jesus, after 40 days of resurrection appearances and presence with the disciples ascends, goes up, is taken up, leave them standing there.

It's probably fitting that Luke tells of Jesus final moments on earth because it was Luke who so wonderfully tells the story of Jesus first moments on earth.

Both stories begin with announcements. An announcement from God to a peasant girl in a small town that she is to be visited by the Holy Spirit of God and will become the mother of our Savior, Jesus. And Jesus himself who says, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; "

In both stories there is a bewildered band of brothers who are sent to tell the good news that they hear and witness. Shepherds stand in awe and terror looking skywards and hear the pronouncement of an angel saying, "born to you this day in the city of David a savior who is Christ the lord" who is joined by an angel chorus – who declare loud enough for the heavens to ring, "Gloria in excelsis day," and the shepherds making haste to go and see what has happened as the angels declare peace on earth and good will to all people as Jesus life on earth begins.

And Luke who ends his gospel with those other brothers standing looking skyward with what once again must be a mixture of awe and fear as Jesus disappears in the clouds only, once again to be called back to reality by two angels in white who tell them, "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." And just as the shepherds made haste, so too do the disciples make their way back to Jerusalem "with great joy" awaiting the coming of the Spirit as they worshipped him, just like the shepherds did in the beginning. In the story of his birth, before the shepherds went into the world to spread the news, Mary Jesus mother keeps all these things pondering them in her heart which she is no doubt still doing as the disciples return to tell the ascension story and Luke says, "All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus." Luke's story begins and ends in joy because of what God has done.

Acts presents such a great picture of the disciples, more than 40 days over the terror of his death and the shock of his resurrection, standing -- looking skyward -- watching Jesus go. Once again he is taken from them -- not this time by death -- but by something far more amazing -- more incredible. One moment he is physically with them -- just as real as they are -- the next he is taken up, accepted by the clouds and by his own testimony, some of which we read from John today -- he is soon-- if not already to be

seated beside God.

Angels lighting up the sky in the beginning and at the end a couple of guys in white robes stand nearby and they ask, in effect, 'what are you waiting for, he'll come back, just like you saw him leave.' Implying, if not saying, it's time to get going.

So they go, back to the familiarity of the upper room -- which had become like home. They prayed and thought long and hard about the things he said. Perhaps they were beginning to understand that his going, was part of the plan. Hadn't only a few days earlier he told them about going to prepare rooms for them in his father's house? Had he not just seemingly moments before prayed in their presence that they might be one. One body. The church.

People have asked, 'why did Jesus have to leave?' Why not stay? Jesus goes so that the spirit may come. Jesus goes so that the body of Christ, his body, the church might come into being and be and go into the world, in our world, everywhere the church is -- we together, collectively -- we are the body of Christ, the physical manifestation of Christ, -- the church.. So that in all the places the church is he might help to heal the sick, and share the good news, and bind up the broken hearted. He goes so that we might become what we are supposed to become. That's what Pentecost is about. It's about the Spirit in the world in us being his body -- the church.

This is what and who we are. We are those shepherds who witness his

coming and tell the story. We are his disciples, infused by the spirit and one with him who go into all the world, who become and are the church. We are his Body, gathering week by week, --physically gathered together, hearing scripture, praying, praising a Ruler who is far above all the powers and principalities, presidents and governments of this world, affirming our faith, hope and trust in the one who has gone to prepare a place for us.

We are Christ's own gathered to wash and welcome new members, dramatically acting out the meaning of Jesus' own dying and rising, as with our arms we hold an infant as he would, blessing and bringing new life into the family of faith. We are his body embracing them, nurturing them, watching them grow and celebrating them along the way.

We are Christ's Body gathered to forgive sins and in that process to forgive one another -- even in our private whispered confessions the whole church is present-- proclaiming the deeply subversive Good News: your sins are forgiven.

We are his Body gathered to lovingly care for its sick and saddened members, recognizing Christ in them, and committing ourselves to minister to them, attempting to mirror, in our life together, God's own infinite compassion and mercy, touching and loving as Christ would touch and love.

We are his body gathered to praise God for leaders, to appoint them as such, to recognize the blessing and torment of leadership based on service, flowing from our memory of being sent out by Christ in service to the

world.

We are his body, even when at death we gather to give witness to the resurrection and to declare that loved ones place in the body of Christ even as they have achieved that place of rest.

We are his body gathered to eat at a table open to all, acting out for all to see and touch, to hear and smell, the new order of peace and justice which God is birthing among us even now. We gather to eat, to nourish the body of Christ, and we have a glimpse of what it feels to be truly human, made in God's image.

Here, in the washing, eating, listening, announcing, praying, anointing, forgiving, marrying, celebrating, healing, burying, we are Christ's own Body, taken, blessed, broken and given for the life of the world.

We need no longer look up to heaven; The Body of Christ that is gone, is, in fact, right here. We are that Body, we are his own, and the fact that he is away from us physically matters not at all.

So, too, the final word, the final promise, that final element to remember is Jesus' own promise to all of us -- all of us who in his physical absence make up his body for the world -- to be with us always -- and to return to us. In the meantime we do not stand looking heavenward in prolonged anticipation -- we are called to be bathed in the power of the Spirit on PENTECOST – We are called to watch and wait and anticipate the coming to us of the spirit... heavenly dove...tongues of fire....holy wind....do you see them....even now to us they are descending.

What are we waiting for. Go, in the spirit, with God.