

Year C
Ascension Sunday
May 29, 2022
Acts 1:1-11
Luke 24:44-53

This morning you might have noticed that two of our lessons tell essentially the same story: that Jesus was taken up into heaven, right before the amazed eyes of his disciples. Both the reading from the Book of Acts, and the Gospel of Luke tell the story of Jesus' ascension bodily into heaven, which is why we call this Ascension Sunday. The Feast of the Ascension actually was on Thursday, but we have the option of moving the feast to today, and I wanted to do that because that way we can continue the story next Sunday with the Feast of Pentecost.

You might know that both the Gospel of Luke, and the Book of Acts were thought to be written by the same person: Luke the Physician. We know almost nothing about him for certain, but the tradition has it that he and Paul traveled and worked together spreading the good news about Jesus. Obviously, Luke's gospel tells the story of Jesus's birth, ministry, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension. The Book of the Acts of the Apostles (which is the long name) is Luke's telling of the birth of the Church, and how Paul and the other disciples spread the gospel to the Jews, and then throughout the Roman Empire.

So we hear the story of the ascension twice, by the same writer, in two slightly different ways. The Acts version is sort of a recap for Theophilus—kind of like we see in TV shows with an ongoing plot line. In both versions, Jesus ascends bodily into heaven, and in both versions he promises his disciples will receive a sort of heavenly "power" in a few days. In the gospel version the disciples are told to stay in Jerusalem, which they do, "and they were continually in the temple blessing God." In fact, the disciples' response to the ascension is joy and thanksgiving. They have been witnesses to another miraculous event regarding their master; not only has he risen from the dead, and been with them for 40 days performing miracles, but now he has been taken up by God to sit at God's right hand. They know this because Jesus "opened their minds to understand the scriptures" so that they understood how Jesus fulfilled the ancient prophecies. These events gave them faith to endure the loss of their master—the Messiah—and to proclaim his message "to the ends of the earth." They didn't have Jesus present in the flesh anymore, which would have been a very difficult loss, but they had his promise of a return, and his promise of the coming gift of the Holy Spirit.

Because of Luke's writings, we have this sentence in both the Apostle's Creed, and the Nicene Creed: "He ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father."

This is a foundational teaching, and one that we say in every service of Morning Prayer, and the Eucharist. It's actually painted in gold letters above the altar in front of you.

But when you think about this, does all of this seem too amazing to be true? That God became flesh, in the form of Jesus, was born as we are, grew up just like we do, ministered in that body, then died agonizingly on the cross. He then rose from the dead in a body, lived on earth for 40 more days, then ascended into heaven in that body. Do you wonder how it can be? Are you scared to wonder if it can be? I've had people tell me that they don't dare to doubt, for fear of being "smitten" by God. It's okay to wonder. It's okay to doubt. Actually, stronger faith usually comes as a result of doubt. We are created in God's image, with intelligence and reason. God doesn't expect us to leave our brains at the door of the church.

Fortunately for us, we don't have to *prove* that all of this is true. Jesus says "follow me." He asks us to *live* the gospel. To live as though you know it's true, even when sometimes you're shaky in your faith. Remember that action can change our hearts and our minds. And there is no way we can explain everything about God, anyway; the nature of the Divine is that it's beyond our comprehension. If you can explain it all, it's not God. So if you have trouble accepting or understanding the Ascension, try to imagine it. Sometimes imagination can take us places that reason cannot. Create the image in your mind: the disciples, Jesus ascending in a white cloud. Imagine the setting—is it hot? Is there a breeze? Imagine the disciples' emotions, worries, joys and concerns. Then put yourself in the scene. What is it like? How does it feel? What do you think? What would it have been like to follow Jesus *then*?

And Jesus invites us to follow him *now*, because he loves us and he knows us. He asks us to love God, and to love one another, not just because it's the way to get to heaven—but because it's the way to live NOW. Jesus says to follow him. Let's follow him on the Way.

Amen

The Rev. Melanie K. Lewis
Rector,
Christ Church, Millwood