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Rev. Debra McGuire

Bethany Presbyterian Church

Acts 1:1-11

June 1, 2025 – Ascension Sunday

***Acts 1:1-11***

***In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach 2until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. 3After his suffering[***[***a***](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts%201%3A1-11%0A&version=NRSVue&interface=print&showfootnotes=no&showxrefs=no&showheadings=no&showwoj=no#fen-NRSVUE-26916a)***] he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. 4While staying[***[***b***](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts%201%3A1-11%0A&version=NRSVue&interface=print&showfootnotes=no&showxrefs=no&showheadings=no&showwoj=no#fen-NRSVUE-26917b)***] with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem but to wait there for the promise of the Father. “This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me; 5for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with[***[***c***](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts%201%3A1-11%0A&version=NRSVue&interface=print&showfootnotes=no&showxrefs=no&showheadings=no&showwoj=no#fen-NRSVUE-26918c)***] the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”***

***6So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” 7He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 8But 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.” 9When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. 11They 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.”***

Today is the day we read scripture that helps explain one of the most important messages of Christianity. A day that is often overlooked because the day never falls on a Sunday – Ascension Day. In our human-made institution called the Church with all of its various denominations and traditions that have come into being during the past 2,000 years, we have devised a three year cycle of scripture reading that highlights all of the important events that give the Church meaning. Easter Sunday we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus on the third day after his death. And on Pentecost we celebrate the day that the holy spirit descended onto believers. But before Jesus could send the holy spirit, he needed to return to God – to ascend.

The end of the gospel of Luke and the beginning of the book of Acts cover some of the same ground. They overlap just a little. The “first book” that today’s text mentions is the gospel of Luke. At the end of the gospel of Luke, scripture describes the resurrection and ascension as happening on the same day. Here at the beginning of the book of Acts, the ascension is described a little more fully and places the timing as 40 days after the resurrection.

Matthew Skinner says “40 days” is just a figure of speech.1 Moses was on Mt. Sinai for 40 days, the Israelites wandered in the desert for 40 years, and Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness after his baptism. Our season of Lent, 40 days before Easter, is inspired by this 40 day testing period that appears in scripture. Ascension Day, which was marked by the church calendar last Thursday, is 40 days after the resurrection. A full 10 days before the coming of the holy spirit, marking the ascension is crucial to our understanding of just how it is that Jesus is *with us now* while at the same time *he is with God*.

Today’s text is important for a few reasons. First, before Jesus ascended, he gave the apostles their life long commission. Jesus told them that the holy spirit would be sent to them, to give them power. Jesus said, “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.”  The mandate to be Christ’s witnesses is presented as a declaration – not a command or a hope. Jesus makes a statement, and that is the work of anyone who follows Christ – to be Christ’s witnesses. What does that mean? That’s a question for the apostles, as well as for you and I. There are as many answers to that question as there are Christian faith traditions. Just what does it mean to be a witness. It kind of means what Mary Oliver says – Pay attention. Be Astounded. Tell about it. Commentator Matthew Skinner says, “Testimony is the central, if not sole, purpose of the ministry that Jesus’ followers conduct in the Spirit’s power.” And here’s an important point Skinner makes: “Faithful *responses* to that testimony, *if* they occur, will be *God’s responsibility* to generate.”1

In other words, how people *respond* to testimony is not part of our responsibility. How many times though do we set out to be witnesses *as well as* *interpreters* of what we have experienced and set out to tell others what their response should be? In all honesty it seems like it would be almost impossible not to interpret anything we have experienced. As humans we are meaning makers. Part of telling anything is explaining it, isn’t it? It is, if the explanation refers to our own experience and our own meaning for ourselves.

Skinner says, “Jesus commissions his witnesses simply to declare what they know to be true…. Jesus does not encourage them to see themselves as learned theologians, gifted rhetoricians, heroic conquerors, aggressive polemicists, savvy strategists, or heaven-sent colonizers. They should report what they themselves have experienced.”1

Today’s text is also important for another reason. The basis for our understanding of God’s relationship to us, God in three persons, does not make any sense unless there is a connection between Jesus on earth, and Jesus with us today. It is the ascension that makes it possible for Jesus to send the holy spirit, and to become the Christ with the power to become Lord of all.

The Church has been responding to the world around it from the very beginning of its existence. One of the earliest statements written that many of us might be familiar with is the Apostles Creed. Our denomination is part of a tradition that accepts many of the old creeds as responsible witnesses to the development of Christianity as the world has changed, calling ourselves to be not only reformed from one way of thinking to another as we respond to the world around us, but to be *constantly* reforming as we move through time, always according to the movement of the spirit. The Apostles Creed includes the words, “I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.
He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again. **He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father.”**

Ascended is past tense, “is” is present tense. In this one sentence in this ancient creed, the ascension allows Jesus to move from the past, only historical sense, to the present, current, to be with us. Being seated at God’s right hand is not a statement about location so much as it is a statement of authority. Jesus is not just raised, but is now in a position to rule.

Jesus told the apostles to stay in Jerusalem and wait for the promise of the Father. They didn’t know what that promise would be, or when it would come. Jerusalem was not a friendly place for them then. It must have taken some courage to wait and wonder. Remember that one gospel tells us that the apostles were hiding in an upper room, wondering if authorities would come and get them too. For Jesus, it was important that their testimony would begin right where they are, in Jerusalem.

If we too are to be witnesses to what we have experienced, we need to start right where we are and be ready for the spirit’s arrival. I don’t believe that any one of us feels the holy spirit one time and then we are always prepared, ready, courageous, unquestioning, certain of what we are being called to say and do. But if we remain open to the possibility of the Spirit working in our lives, we will feel the Spirit’s presence many times.

In the next 10 days we will wait as the apostles did, and consider what it means to experience the grief and amazement of the ascension, the tension of the period of not knowing, and then filled with hope, celebrate the first coming of the Holy Spirit into the world and into us.

Let us pray,

*1Skinner, Matthew, Acts, Interpretation Bible Commentary series, 2025)*

Apostles Creed -- **Ecumenical (interdenominational) versions**

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.
I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.
He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit
and born of the virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried.
He descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again.
**He ascended into heaven,
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.**
He will come again to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of the saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.