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# The Waiting Begins

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 21 May 2023

Acts 1:1-11 • Ephesians 1:15-23 • Luke 24:44-53

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May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

Today we celebrate Ascension Day. It falls, actually, on the 18th of May this year. It is always 40 days, or the sixth Thursday, after Easter. Here is another “40” — like 40 days for Jesus in the wilderness (Luke 4:2), or 40 days and 40 nights of rain causing the flood (Gen 7:1). Here we are talking about Jesus appearing after his crucifixion, in various ways and in various places, for forty days more. Then, at the end of forty days, he ascends finally to be with his Father in heaven.

For the disciples this could have been shattering. It was bad enough that Jesus was tried, condemned and crucified. We may imagine the apostles' despair on that Friday evening, after the body had been taken down and carried to the tomb. In spite of all Jesus had told them, that night they didn't expect to see him again. Then — miracle of miracles! — Jesus returns. He is seen by some of the women. Then by several of the disciples in their rooms. Then by the sea, sharing a bit of barbecued fish. And several more times, though they may

not be specifically recorded, Jesus appeared to the people. Hope returned, as they saw that Jesus had in fact cheated and defeated death, just as he said he would. He had not really left us; death could not divide us from him.

In defeating death, and rising again, God showed through his Son that his word is true. Jesus established a new covenant with us in his blood, the blood he shed on the cross. It is not a light thing God did, re-establishing a strong bond between himself and us. God doesn't do this very often. The last time he made a covenant was with Abram, and how long ago was that! As with that earlier covenant, God surely knew that humankind, his creation, would struggle to be true and keep our end of the bargain. But God cannot be otherwise than true and faithful; and so Jesus's death on the cross had to be followed by his resurrection. In this way did God keep his word.

But now he is going away again, and again, the disciples have reason to worry. How can he leave us again? they ask themselves. We need him! Jesus gives a few parting words: in Luke's Gospel and in the Acts of the Apostles, which are really two parts of the same book, Jesus reveals that he is in fact not leaving them alone. His presence, the presence of the true God, will remain with them, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, and he tells them to stay in Jerusalem until they have received that great gift.

Ascension Day, then, foreshadows another big day in our calendar — the day when the Holy Spirit comes down. And what day is that? Right! Pentecost! We'll talk about that next week. Stay tuned! Two days, closely linked. Ascension and Pentecost. Christ goes up, the Holy Spirit comes down. And the disciples only have to wait ten days in between. Don't you wonder what those ten days were like!

The miracle for us is again God's faithfulness. We are not left bereft and alone. Jesus dies, then rises again. Jesus ascends, and the Holy Spirit comes down to continue our strong connection with God. God models faithfulness for us all, first in his Son Jesus.

But not only in his Son.

There is a cute saying that goes, "God could not be everywhere, so he invented mothers." Well, actually, God can be everywhere. But it is undeniable that God cares for us not only directly, in ways we are often unaware of, but through other people. The loving care of parents for their children is God's care personified. And just as Jesus did not leave us alone, but provided for our ongoing welfare, so a parent's love does not end when the child grows up. It continues all through life. Love is of God, and the ability to love is both God-given and God-like.

Ascension Day marks the end of Jesus's sojourn on earth, and the beginning of our responsibility. Already, in his closing words before he rises up through the

clouds, Jesus is speaking of what we must do: “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” A witness is one who knows a thing from direct experience and then tells others about it. It is seeing and then speaking. The apostles and the other disciples were direct witnesses, and with Jesus’s ascension, that chapter was closed. No more witnesses to his life as a human would come about. The seeing had been done; the speaking was now to begin. Assuredly it could not begin until the Spirit came upon them and gave them knowledge and guidance on how to proceed. Then many of them went out in all directions, and we know about the journeys of some of the key people, Peter and Paul and others, from the Book of Acts.

But I’m getting ahead of myself again. Jesus’s ascension certainly would have startled those who were watching, let alone the appearance of the two angels, who nonchalantly chide the watchers about reacting with awe to such a commonplace thing, as a man rising up into the sky. But his rising did show them something else as well. All through his ministry on earth, Jesus took pains to convince the disciples that his powers were not unique. His powers were of God. He spoke continually of his Father, whose words he used and whose acts he performed. And he tried to convince them that they too had a connection to the Father: God is my Father and yours, he would say to them. You too may perform deeds of power, indeed greater than I did, he would say.

And so the attentive and faithful disciple might begin to realise that Jesus gives, not only God’s love to us, but a little of God’s power, too. And beyond that, a little bit of the wonderful fate of Jesus would also be ours. As Jesus rises up to heaven, so too will we rise, if we believe in him. The manner of our going might not be exactly like that of Jesus, but Jesus promises us that we too will rise to the Father, who loves every one of us and wants to take us to himself. Ascension is a foreshadowing, not just of Pentecost, but in the longer term, of our own blessed fate in the hands of our loving Father.

As the late preacher and writer Fred Craddock wrote:

The period of the church between Jesus’ departure and his return is not a desert in which believers alternate between memory and hope in an effort to sustain themselves. Both are vital for faith, to be sure, but in the meantime there is Pentecost. Pentecost completes Easter just as Easter completes Good Friday.<sup>1</sup>

For the time being, we are on the ground with the disciples, having seen Jesus rise up through the skies, and waiting for the blessed coming of the Holy Spirit. Then the work will really begin.

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<sup>1</sup> Craddock, Fred B. *Luke* (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky: 1990), p294.