

“OK—So now what?”
A Sermon Delivered
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by
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Acts 1: 6 – 11

I had an associate pastor for several years who was one the finest men I ever knew. He had been an art teacher for decades and after retirement from the school system he went back to school to become a minister. Well, you can take the art teacher out of the classroom but you can't take the art out of his life! Thank God for that!

Every year when it came time for the Ascension he would pull out a painting that never failed to cause us to laugh. It showed a blue sky with one puffy white cloud in the middle. Protruding from the bottom of the cloud were two sandal-clad feet.

For me, that will always represent the Ascension. I am afraid that in my laughter I may have missed the point! There are some funny aspects of the painting but there is also a profound sense of separation.

So grant me a few moments and I will try to do something that is seldom attempted in a Protestant Church. I will try to take another look at the Ascension and it's meaning for us.

Most basically the Ascension is the story of the departure of Jesus' body from the midst of our world. That departure was accompanied by a promise to return one day and a challenge to take the power of the Holy Spirit and be about our Lord's work.

As most of you know (after dozens of my Maine stories) I have a home on the coast of Maine. Down the road from that cottage is a small airport, the Bar Harbor Airport. It's not much, but it does have regularly scheduled service to Boston and over the years I have flown out of Bar Harbor to Boston and beyond many times.

On a particular day 29 years ago Judy and our son drove me to Bar Harbor to catch a flight that would take me to Boston and on to Connecticut. As I grabbed my bag and headed for the plane my son clung to our hug with a bit more ferocity than normal. He asked me when I was coming back. I explained that I would be back in about a week and after explaining again how long a week was he released his grip.

The rest of the story is really Judy's to tell because she was the one left on the ground. Our son was not about to leave the spot where he was standing when the plane took off. He was determined to stay right there and wait for the plane to come back.

I don't want to push this story but we can all remember times when a friend or parent or child has left our presence with a promise of return. We believe them but how do we get beyond the sense of abandonment? How do we break free of the sense of loss and get on with the business of living.

It's not just children who find this difficult. Have you ever had to say goodbye to an elder who is homebound or in a nursing facility and watched them simply sit and stare at your departing form?

The disciples had walked the dusty roads of Palestine with Jesus for a couple of years. They had followed him into the depths of hell and to the heights of the highest mountains. At every moment it had been his love and his guidance and his vision that had opened the way forward. And then his death had dashed their hopes only to have them rekindled in the days following the resurrection by his appearances in their midst.

Remember the story of the two disciples walking on the Emmaus Road with a stranger. That stranger turned out to be Jesus and that Jesus took the time to once again explain all that the disciples needed to know about matters of faith.

The Ascension is the end of that chapter. Jesus has called the disciples together one last time. It was the final meeting before Jesus' earthly body was to ascend to God and the disciples had more questions to ask.

When are you going to restore the kingdom of Israel? If not right now how about when you come back—and by the way—when are you coming back—oh—and where are you going anyway?

Like a 4 year old at the airport fence, the disciples had almost no idea of what was going on.

They stood and watched as Jesus' body ascended into heaven. How do I know? It may have looked like the painting with the two feet sticking out of the cloud but I sort of doubt it.

And then the disciples were left there on the ground staring at the sky. There is that temptation to just stand still and keep looking. After all, if you wander away you might miss the return.

In the disciples' case they weren't given much time to ponder their options. Two angels snuck up on them while they were busy looking at the cloud!

The angels asked, “Why are you just standing there?”

The honest answer was that they felt abandoned.

The Ascension is the story of Jesus ascent to the right hand of God. It is also the story of our Lord’s physical departure from our midst.

We may talk about our lives in faith as a journey but there are many who follow the pilgrimage to the edge of physical certainty and then wait there for further directions. In life, and faith, that’s called being “stuck.”

The ascension is the story of the separation. The ascension is also a story of empowerment and commission.

Vs. 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.

Those were Jesus’ last words spoken to his disciples before the ascension.

The Holy Spirit traditionally arrived on Pentecost, next Sunday in our church calendar this year. So we have a week!

We can stand at the airport fence and wonder what’s going on for a whole week. (Come to think of it I have probably spent a whole lot more than a week waiting at airports—but that’s another story.)

The arrival of the Holy Spirit is our provisioning for the journey. It is the **power** that our Lord promised in his final words of instruction. Jesus has commissioned us to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. For that task we shall need support and **power!**

Have you ever walked into a prison visiting area? I have more times than I ever would want to remember. Sitting there at a dirty little formica table I had to tell a man that his wife was in the hospital and he could not go to her. His wail of despair pushed me to the very edge of hell. That’s what it means to me to be the Lord’s witness at the very end of the earth.

Without the Holy Spirit I could not go there. Without the Holy Spirit there would be no going on. The Lord’s physical form left us at the Ascension but the spirit he sent to our souls is the **power** of creation itself. The question is, do we trust ourselves with that power and what are we to do with it?

The first part of that question has an easy answer. It is not for us to decide if we are worthy of the spirit and the power our Lord has poured over our bodies and into our souls. It’s done!

The second part of the question is tougher. What are we to do with the power of this Holy Spirit that is within and around us?

While it will take a lifetime to answer that question, the Lord's last words give us a place to start.

YOU WILL BE MY WITNESSES TO ... THE ENDS OF THE EARTH.

How many attorneys do we have here today?

A witness is a person who is called upon to tell the truth and to limit his or her testimony to those things that he or she actually knows first hand.

Right?

I believe there can be slightly broader definitions of "witness." But there's no need; this is enough.

We are not called to judge or condemn, we are not called to explain or control, and we are not called to be God or even God's public relations team.

We are called to stand in the midst of creation and live our lives as a witness to the Lord who loved us and trusted us and equipped us to never be without the resources we need.

We can witness with our words—better yet with our songs.

We can witness with our hands—better yet with our arms that embrace.

We can witness with our minds—better yet with our hearts.

Why are we just standing here looking to heaven?

We are the very people our Lord has equipped with the power to be His witnesses to the ends of the earth.

Amen