

You Are Witnesses
Luke 24:44-53
Acts 1:1-11
Ascension of the Lord
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Easter Sunday was six weeks ago. Since then we have been in the Easter Season, or Eastertide. Eastertide will conclude next Sunday on Pentecost. This Sunday we celebrate the Ascension of the Lord, when Jesus was taken up into the clouds and took his place next to the Father in heaven. The Ascension of the Lord, technically last Thursday, occurs 40 days after Easter. The period of 40 days comes from our reading from Acts, chapter 1.

The Gospel of Luke, and the Book of Acts are written by the same person. The gospel tells the story of Jesus and Acts of the Apostles the story of the beginning of the church.

Our gospel reading this morning, comes from the end of Luke's Gospel, chapter 24, verses 44 through 53. Luke's first story of the ascension takes place on the evening of the day of Jesus' resurrection. It was a busy day. Early in the morning the women found the empty tomb. Jesus appeared to Peter, although Luke only mentions that it happened. Jesus appeared to two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus, a story we hear in detail. Then as the two men return to Jerusalem, and are telling the other disciples what had happened, Jesus makes his third and final appearance to his disciples. Who are initially "startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost." Jesus calms them with "peace be with you," shows them his hands and feet, and asks for something to eat. All to prove to them that he was not a spirit, but their teacher and friend, resurrected in the flesh.

This is where our reading begins. Listen now to the end of Luke's gospel account of the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus:

⁴⁴ Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you-- that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled."

⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶ and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

⁵⁰ Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. ⁵¹ While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. ⁵² And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; ⁵³ and they were continually in the temple blessing God. This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Sermon (Part 1)

Luke's gospel account of the ascension of Jesus, is focused on what the disciples have seen and what it meant. Jesus "opened their minds to understand the scriptures." How everything that was written about him in the law and the prophets and the psalms was fulfilled in his life, death, and resurrection. And since this is a post-resurrection appearance, he reminds them that it was written that the "Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem." Then, in verse 48, Jesus tells them, "You are witnesses of these things."

To be a witness has several meanings, and we are going to look at three of them this morning. The first meaning to see something happen, and this is what Jesus is saying to the disciples. He explains how the things that he has done and shown them are the fulfillment of scripture. How his suffering and death were required to happen. The disciples who spent the last several years with Jesus traveling around Galilee and Jerusalem were witnesses to all that had happened.

Then finally, before leading them out to Bethany, where Jesus will ascend to the Father, Jesus promises to send what the Father promised, which we know to be the Holy Spirit.

We too are disciples of Christ, and even though we were not there when Jesus walked the earth, we too are witnesses to the power of the Holy Spirit. As members of the church we are witnesses to what God is doing in the church and in the world. We witness the power of the Holy Spirit in the life-giving water of baptism. We witness the presence of Christ at the Lord's table when we gather for the feast that Jesus prepares for us. Jesus says to us:

"You are witnesses to these things."

In our second reading, we make the transition ahead forty days, and hear the second of Luke's two stories of the ascension. Listen now to Acts of the Apostles, chapter 1, verses 1 through 11:

1:1 In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning ² until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.

³ After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. ⁴ While staying 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; ⁵ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

⁶ 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."

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Sermon (Part 2)

In this reading, Luke's second account of the ascension of Jesus, we hear that Jesus spent forty days with the disciples given them, "many convincing proofs" and "speaking about the kingdom of God." And when the forty days were over Jesus said to them, "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."

In Acts, we encounter the second definition of witness. To witness means to testify or to speak truth as in a court of law. The disciples are to be witnesses to everything that Jesus taught them. They are to witness to everything that he did, and they are to witness, "in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

And, again, as disciples of Jesus Christ, we are charged with witnessing to the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Witness to the message of his life, and to the wonder of his death, resurrection, and ascension. We are empowered by the Holy Spirit to tell the world what it means to be a Christian and follow the teachings and calling of Jesus Christ.

I said we would look at three types of witness, and the third types comes from the Greek word used in both the gospel and acts. The Greek word is:

μάρτυρος (*martyros*) where we get the word martyr. To be a martyr is to give your life in witness to something, and if you continue to read in Acts, several of those who heard Jesus' call to be witnesses to his truth died a martyr's death. Many early Christians, and others through the centuries gave their life for their belief in Jesus and for his Church. While it is not likely that you or I would be called on to die for our faith, it is in a sense true that we live our lives for the church and for our faith. It is just as much a witness to the truth of the gospel when we live our lives according to the teachings of Jesus and following his commandments. Commandments to love God, to love one another, and to love the others of the world.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus opened the hearts and minds of the disciples to the words of the law, and the prophets, and the psalms. The words about him, and about his life death and resurrection. And Jesus reminded them that they were witnesses to these things. And in much the same way we are witnesses to the truth of Jesus Christ through the sacraments and through the Word of God, read and proclaimed in the name of Jesus Christ.

In the Acts of the Apostles, Jesus called on his disciples, and calls on us to be his witnesses to the truth of his good news. Empowered by the Holy Spirit the disciples spread the word beginning in Jerusalem and out into the world. And now, in our time, we are called to witness to that same truth in our church, in our community, and in the word. Through the power of that same Spirit we witness to the truth of the Gospel with our lives and with our words.

Jesus says to us and to the church: "You are witnesses."

Let us pray:

Lord, you make us witnesses to the wonders of your gospel truth and call us to witness to the world around us, with our words, and with our lives. Fill our hearts with the understanding of all that you taught and all that you did for us and for the world. Grant us the Holy Spirit to empower us and guide us to sing your praises in this world. Ascended Lord Jesus, your name be praised.

Amen.