

Acts 1:1-11 New International Version (NIV)

1 In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach ²until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. ³After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. ⁴On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. ⁵For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

⁶Then they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

⁷He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

⁹After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

¹⁰They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ¹¹"Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

Luke 24:44-53 New International Version (NIV)

⁴⁴He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."

⁴⁵Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. ⁴⁶He told them, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be

preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. ⁴⁸You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

⁵⁰When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. ⁵¹While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. ⁵²Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. ⁵³And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.

“Defying Gravity”
The Rev. Lisa J. Durkee
May 16, 2021

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

One of the gifts of returning to teach for three years recently has been working with students from all over the world and from many different faith backgrounds; and, increasingly from no faith background at all. In my World Religions class, when we would focus on some so-called *basic* vocabulary, I was challenged to help them understand the difference between two words, immanent and transcendent. This morning’s scripture lessons would be a good introduction to exactly some of the most perplexing concepts in this regard. How is it that a god, the one God, whom so many of these kids conceive of as a kind of distant, other-worldly figure--which is to say always transcendent--can also be someone we turn to in relationship? What does it mean to say that God, in Jesus, was also immanent? I wonder what the textbook we worked with would do with the story of the ascension, if it went into detail.

Poor Ann, who asked me whether I planned to focus on the ascension, has to put up with my shifting plans. I told her no two weeks ago, but as I read through the texts for Ascension and also for “The Seventh Sunday of Easter,” I changed my

mind. Ascension is not a moment in the Christian year on which we focus very much in our Protestant tradition, but the supernatural quality of what we read, and some interesting ways of reflecting on it have asked that we note it this year. In this morning's scripture lessons, we hear twice from the writer Luke, and even in two versions of the account by the same author, we have some discrepancy in the details. Still, there is such deep substance in what he recounts that I believe we have to spend some time with this text—with this extraordinary moment in the story of Jesus' time on earth.

I read an interesting commentary that noted how paintings of Jesus' ascension tend to be either ridiculous or grotesque [from Barclay]; how somehow the artists must be equally as confused or awed by the event as we are, and so find no realistic or even clearly imaginative way to depict it (*Blair R. Monie, pastor of Preston Hollow Presbyterian Church in Dallas, Texas*). This retired professor and pastor, Blair Monie, makes an interesting point regarding the timing of the event in these two accounts: In Luke's *Gospel* telling, Jesus ascends, presumably to heaven, late in the day on which he has appeared to the disciples on the road to Emmaus. His ascension is the very last thing that Jesus does on earth—he leaves it, and the disciples' response is to worship him with joy. In what we hear in the first chapter of Acts, Jesus' ascension happens forty days after he first appears to them, and two angelic figures have to tell the disciples to snap out of it when they freeze, staring after him in his departure.

And here and now? We barely speak of it at all. Jesus goes to God, and the most explicit mention of it we ever make is relegated to a single line in our Apostles' Creed: "He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of God." There is so very much carried in that line, and so very much to which we might respond in considering what we have just heard. Jesus of Nazareth, who had been crucified

by those who feared him, had been raised from the dead and walked and talked among those who loved him. Then, while they watched, he was raised up from the earth to be with God, where he now intercedes on our behalf.

I have been thinking a lot about the ascension of Jesus, in part wondering why we haven't paid much attention to it, and also wondering what I personally think of it. Can *you* imagine the power of God to include lifting our Christ up from the earth, bodily. As Bruce Epperly put it in his own musings, "What are we to make of Jesus' Ascension? Of course, it's not out of the question that Jesus defied gravity, but is that the real point? Is the Ascension about gravity or spirituality, geography or vocation?" Gravity or spirituality? Geography or vocation? I invite you to consider your own initial reactions to this story. Are you awestruck? Does it inspire you to worship? Are you maybe a bit skeptical of the physicality of things? What I found myself considering throughout the week is why it would seem any more astounding to me that God could empower Christ to ascend to heaven when we know God through Jesus because *God was incarnate as a man*. Astounding. Miraculous. Gift. Even still, we can ask whether this new geography of Jesus' inspires or induces in us a strong or new spirituality and even vocation?

After reading the remark about artists' renderings of the ascension, I kept searching, kept reading, and found that the rather celebrated preacher, Barbara Lundblad, might argue with the point I raised earlier from Blair Monie, saying that that no artwork captures the ascension in a way that makes sense of it. I will share on the screen here the image Lundblad ponders when she writes, "Not long ago I saw a wonderful picture of Jesus' ascension. It was a black and white woodcut print finely etched. In the picture Jesus is rising up as the disciples watch him disappear into the clouds. If you look closely at the picture, not in the clouds, but on the ground, you can see footprints on the earth. The artist has carefully etched Jesus'

footprints down on the level where the disciples are standing with their mouths open. Perhaps the artist was simply imagining a homey detail that isn't in the text. Or, perhaps, the artist is pressing us with the old question, "Why do you stand looking up into heaven? Look at these footprints here on the earth." Lundblad later quotes Dietrich Bonhoeffer as "[keeping] the message going," as he wrote, "The body of Christ takes up space on the earth," he said. That is, the Body of Christ makes footprints. Bonhoeffer goes on, ". . . the incarnate Christ needs not only ears or hearts, but living people who will follow him."

So, what do we make of *our* religion? How is it that we worship Jesus? Do we stay looking up at Jesus, in some way defying gravity ourselves as we keep our worship separate from the earth and its people? Or, does our worship of Jesus make footprints that last, telling others the way that Jesus walked when we let our feet walk for him, now that he has ascended. Jesus told his disciples to wait for what he would send them, the Holy Spirit, to which we are to respond, *empowered by this Spirit*. And that response doesn't look like standing still, and it doesn't look like gazing upward. We *celebrate* the ascension because even heaven celebrates the return of Jesus, who had his home with God the Creator eternally. We worship this Jesus because he says in joy and power: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." And with that power and authority, Jesus came to live among us and to teach us a way of living that defies the powers of the world, and opens to *us* the promise of heaven. Were I to paint a picture of Jesus' ascension, I think I might have to include a kind of Jacob's ladder on which movement goes both ways. Jesus has come to us from God, and has returned to God so that we, also, may turn to God, following him home. The way of living to which Jesus invites us defies even death, and what is our response?

One of the gifts of being called here to Blue Hill and moving in these past several months is not only hearing about, but also seeing the ways in which this church has an impact on our community. You don't need to listen any further than the announcements this morning to know the way we celebrate the interconnection between our outreach and our worship. We will leave footprints when we gather for Pride Day on June 12th, celebrating LGBTQ persons and lifting up their equal importance in our lives; we leave footprints, too, when we do all that we can to help Simmering Pot continue to serve up a hot meal, or help to stock the shelves of the Tree of Life food pantry. So, we leave footprints in these incredible ways that we live as the Body of Christ; it's a tremendously physical thing to *live* our faith. Maybe my former students would have an easier time understanding the difference between that kind of immanence and the transcendence that sometimes baffles us talking about things like resurrection and ascension if they also volunteered in their local soup kitchens, or stocked shelves in their local food pantries, or joined in the festivities that celebrate rather than denigrate differences among us.

Maybe my former students would understand the *merging* of immanence and transcendence in our lived faith if they knew that Christ's spirit remains with us. The gift of Christ's ascension and sending the Holy Spirit is just this. We are together in Spirit no less significantly virtually, through Zoom, than when we gather within the sanctuary walls. We know this in a way like we understand that Jesus lived, died, ascended and yet remains with us.

What footprints do we leave? Do they look like love? Do they sound like joy? Do they proclaim a living hope? We worship Jesus, who has taught us all these things. Let us go forth in joy, in hope and in love to do our part in raising earth to heaven. Amen!