

Gone, Here, Coming: Acts 1:6-11; Luke 24: 45-53
Reflection for Baltimore Carmel *Lectio*, April 23, 2020

Although he wrote 1/4th of the NT, we don't know much about Luke. The NT reveals he was an associate of St. Paul, wrote excellent, consciously literary Greek, and was deeply concerned to communicate the Gospel to the Greco-Roman World, to link Jesus' story to theirs and to that of the Jews thus to emphasize Jesus' message of God's love for the excluded, marginalized, and despised

With the exception of a note added to the end of Mark, Luke is the only evangelist to record Jesus' Ascension, the hinge between his gospel and the Acts of the Apostles. We can miss this because John was inserted between Luke's two books. Luke closes with a brief teaching of Jesus who leads "them out as far as Bethany," blesses them, "and was carried up into heaven." (24:50-51) Acts opens

~in 1:1-5 recapitulating Luke's gospel, recalling Theophilus to whom his gospel was addressed, summarizing what Jesus "did and taught," recalling his resurrection & promises (vv 3-8 Jesus' "Last Will and Testament")

~in 1:6-8 with a final exchange between Jesus and the disciples (note v. 4 & 8 commands disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the HS. Note: some Jews believed the HS had been withheld since Ezra's time.) In v. 8 Luke geographically outlines Acts' narrative: Jerusalem, all Judea, Samaria, and "the ends of the earth"--- once the gospel reaches Rome, it goes everywhere.

~in 1:9-11 with the Ascension of Jesus.

Jesus' Ascension is the Lucan hinge of two stories: #1. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection (the gospel) and #2. the spread of Jesus' message, the growth of the church (the Acts of the Apostles). It is *because of* the Ascension, that God can send the empowering HS on believers. The HS is of major importance to Luke whose gospel's action is directed by angelic/heavenly beings: Annunciations to Zechariah & Mary; heavenly figures at the Transfiguration and the Empty Tomb, and now at the Ascension. If an angelic being shows up, some human being is about to be faced with a big challenge!

I preface remarks about the Ascension with a verse summarizing my major point. (This is like starting the joke with the punch line!) Hebrews 9:24: "Christ has entered, not into a sanctuary made with hands . . . but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf."

Everybody lives by a story. Annually the lectionary walks us through the story of Jesus, communicating Christology not by doctrine, but by the narrative of Jesus' life. Walking with Jesus through the events of his life, we are reminded we live, not only in human time, but in God's time and by Jesus' story. A mysterious part of that story is that forty days after he "was raised," Jesus "was lifted up" to heaven, aorist passive verbs indicating an action was done to or for someone with continuing effect. Jesus was raised and lifted and we receive the effect.

Questioning the Ascension's historicity, "how it could have happened," misses the point. We remember the children of Israel were led by a cloud in the wilderness and a cloud enveloped Moses at the tent of meeting. In scripture, clouds symbolize God's transcendence and mystery. Similarly, in the excitement of the "biggie," "super sized" Christian feasts of Easter and Pentecost, and because it often falls on a week day, the Ascension alas is overshadowed. But it is a feast of empowerment and hope, assuring us that the Jesus story is not only one of coming, here, gone, but of gone, here, coming. Jesus has GONE from us in death, is HERE with us after his resurrection in empowering comfort, and is COMING again at the *parousia*, his return in glory at history's close. Gone. Here. Coming. The Ascension fulfills the promises of the text in John 14 which Prof. Schneider's unpacked for us last week. That text, and this one mesh.

Gone. Here. Coming. "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." (Acts 1:3) This balances Jesus' story. At the beginning for 40 days he was alone and tempted in the wilderness. At the end he spends 40 days with his followers in his glorified state, finishing the two fold task of Easter. First, there must be no doubt that Jesus was raised in bodily form. Second, the disciples must understand that the Kingdom of God is not a temporal, political entity. Their question in verse 6 about restoring the kingdom to Israel suggests they don't get it. (Some folks still don't.)

When these two tasks were completed, as he was raised from the dead by God, Jesus is raised to glory and power at God's right hand (as the writer of Hebrews says "to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.") For the first disciples, Jesus' Ascension was a time of completion and of separation. The bodily Jesus was gone. The resurrection story was complete. They were poised to receive the HS, on the verge of the narrative which includes us. By the Ascension Christ provides the means which empowers us to live for him now and to be enlivened by the hope of his return. The Ascension prepared the early disciples, and prepares us, for Pentecost the fulfillment of Jesus' promise "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses..." (Acts 1:8)

Paradoxically Jesus departs to be with us forever. In John Jesus says it's good that he goes away, for otherwise the Paraclete won't come. (16:7) Writing about the HS in Jesus' farewell discourse in John, beloved biblical scholar, Fr. Raymond Brown, says the Paraclete (the One "called alongside") is "not confined to any one time or place." "...the Spirit's presence is not limited by time." (Give Us This Day, May, 2015, p. 47) Romano Guardini makes the same point: "He who is seated on the throne contains the past transfigured to eternal present." (X2) (*The Lord* quoted in Glenstal Book of Readings 295)

Jesus ascended to heaven to be with us everywhere and forever. The last thing Matthew's Jesus says is "I am with you always to the very end of the age." (28:2) In John 14:28 Jesus says, "I am going away, and I am coming to you." The Ephesian letter explains: "he who descended is the very one who ascended higher than the heavens in order to fill the whole universe." (Eph 4: 8, 10) A wonderful thought, but difficult to wrap our minds around. Jesus is gone so that he can be here. If THAT isn't enough: Jesus is gone AND here and COMING. Jesus' Ascension makes possible the coming of the HS that empowers our daily living by providing Christ's continuing presence now and hope for the future in his promised return.

The first disciples stood on the mountain, places of theophany (God appearances), staring up into heaven, I suspect with their mouths hanging open. I sympathize. In Lukan fashion, two heavenly beings, say to the disciples "...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."(Acts 1:11) The NT's witness is that Jesus will return. Matthew's Jesus says "...the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with the angels..." (16:27) Writing to the church in Thessalonica Paul speaks of "glory in the presence of the Lord Jesus when he comes" (2:19) and promises "so we will be with the Lord forever." (4:16-18). We are not to worry about *when* it will occur, but to draw courage and strength from the assurance *that* it will.

Especially in difficult times, the Ascension is a practical source of hope, reminding us that not only did Jesus suffer with and for us, but that he departed to give us power via the Holy Spirit, and will return to take us, whether living or dead, to himself. If he is coming back, and the early Church believed he was, then, in another mind-bender, the final victory has been, is and will be won by Jesus Christ.

As Jesus demonstrates his bodily resurrection and finishes his teaching about God's Kingdom, Ascension completes Easter. It prepares for Pentecost, promising the power that Pentecost delivers, assuring us that the glorified Christ is available to us everywhere all the time. No matter how bad things may seem or what clowns appear to be in charge, Christ is with us and is coming with power and glory and justice. In the meantime we are to be his witnesses, not so much by what we say, as by how we live. Our lives, empowered by the Spirit, full of Christ's hope, are magnetic, and draw people to Him who gives that power and hope.

WE provide the conclusion of the Ascension story. In both Acts and Luke Jesus says to his disciples "*you* will be my witnesses." In his book *God With Us* Rowan Williams writes "We are where Jesus 'happens' in the world." (SPCK, 2017, p. 67) Jesus says "I am sending *you*," I remember that WWI military recruiting poster with Uncle Sam's bony finger pointed at the on-looker. "I want YOU!" The aftermath of the power and proclamation of resurrection's reality is left to us. God took an enormous risk in coming down and living among us as one of us, then departs in glory taking the even greater risk of leaving the whole project of His love --- for what is the story about if not God's love?--- to us. Love was lifted up on the cross. Now Love is lifted up to heaven. Mysteriously, this is our story and our song.

Gone. Here. Coming. By his Ascension Christ "opens the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers." By his going, he remains here. Thus St. Paul eloquently declares "...neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us for the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom 8:37-39) That certainly calls for an ALLELUIA.

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