“Unbelievable”

Rev. Debra McGuire

Bethany Presbyterian Church

Acts 1:1-11

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***Acts 1:1-11***

***In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning 2until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. 3After 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. 4While 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; 5for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”***

***6So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” 7He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.******8But 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.” 9When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. 11They 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 past Wednesday was Ascension Day according to the church calendar. That is the day described in today’s scripture. Having risen from the dead, Jesus then spent 40 days with his disciples and others breaking bread together and teaching about the coming of the holy spirit, and then, Jesus finally leaves the earth, this time, for good.

I always find it startling that Jesus wasn’t *immediately* replaced by the Holy Spirit. I must have read that wrong somewhere along the line. Even after preaching on a regular basis, it was a hard fact to miss because any given church may or may not pull Ascension Day off of its Wednesday pedestal and give it it’s own Sunday. For many of us who gave church only a cursory glance over the years, it would be a very easy thing to assume that Christ died, rose on the third day and immediately went to heaven and the Holy Spirit came but only to traditions who celebrate speaking in tongues. That would be the Cliff Notes version of the resurrection story.

It's intriguing and fun to be able to drink in all of the different facets of the story and experience the story anew with each new insight. It’s a different story when we realize that Jesus rose from the dead, and stayed around. He stayed around for 40 days to continue teaching and reminding the apostles of his past lessons to prepare them for his final ascension. Realizing that Jesus had more to say, that Jesus deepened his relationships even further as the resurrected Jesus is an insight that brings Jesus to life even more.

Ascension Day is 40 days after the resurrection – the bible likes numbers as we might remember other instances of 40 days in scripture. Moses was on Mt. Sinai for 40 days, the Israelites wandered in the desert for 40 years, and Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness after his baptism. Our season of Lent, 40 days before Easter, is inspired by this 40 day testing period that appears in scripture. 40 days before the Ascension is a time period that fits with other biblical time periods.

Then, our Cliff Notes version of the events expands even further when we realize that there are 10 more days of waiting before the coming of the Holy Spirit to those gathered in Jerusalem. We’ll talk more next week when we talk about Pentecost, about why 50 days after Easter was important.

Today I want to highlight those 10 days. Without highlighting Ascension, we might just blink through the next 10 days. Just like we risk missing important insights if we jump from Palm Sunday to Easter, we risk losing insights if we skip the events of today’s scripture. So she was shocked when a respected preacher said in a sermon that he believed in the literal ascension of Christ described in this scripture.

One of the problems that people outside of any faith tradition have, is that the sacred stories and elements of our traditions are full of narrative stories, songs, poems, etc. that are so hard to prove. We want to know things, not just believe them. I read an essay from one commentator1 who said that she was quite comfortable with the unbelievable or supernatural parts of the Bible because those parts were often made to be metaphorical, or from the imagination of the writer, or otherwise explained away as less than real. Less than true. In her Episcopal tradition she often thought it was more helpful to wonder about the meaning of scripture, than it was to worry about how literal the text was.

Jesus was speaking to his disciples before he was taken up into heaven. We read, “*8But 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.” 9When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.”*

This commentator was a little embarrassed at first, that this priest who she respected would believe in the literal ascension of Jesus, such a mystical scene. I mean really, have *you* ever seen someone lifted off the ground into a cloud, and then disappear from sight? She surprised herself though, as she discovered that she was holding two feelings at the same time. On the one hand, she held her preference for meaning over literalism, while holding *this* in her other hand: She writes, “It felt comfortable and thrilling to hear my reasonable, rational, theologically and socially progressive priest surrender to a childlike belief that Jesus was (meta)physically seated at the right hand of the Father. “I was being given permission I didn’t know I craved – even to hope against hope that the same lift that ushered Jesus upward would one day reverse course and return the risen Savior in redemptive glory.”

How do we discern for ourselves what is true, what is real, what is naïveté, what is fantasy, what is impossible? When it concerns the news, these questions are hard enough. When it concerns the state of the world, these questions are hard. Our *life* experiences teach us where we stand as individuals on various topics. Maybe we are basically hopeful people, or basically cynical people, or somewhere in-between.

Our faith though teaches us differently than the world teaches us. How many times in Jesus’ teachings, have we heard that the Messiah has come to turn the world upside down? Our faith teaches us that the hungry will be fed, the poor will be cared for, the sick will be made well, that we needn’t worry because God will provide. Our faith is *defined* by the unbelievable-ness of it all! Our faith experiences are the experiences that keep us searching, keep us asking questions, keep us studying, keep us praying. Our faith experiences are the experiences that keep us astonished at the amazing presence of God. That one time God works a miracle, that one time that God answers a prayer, that one time God soothes our broken heart – is enough to make us trust that with God anything is possible. With God we can believe in unbelievable things.

Let us pray…

1Pershey, Katherine Willis, May 7, 2024, Christian Century, “Jesus in the Clouds.”