

Feast of the Ascension (C)

Lk 24.44-53

Some of you may be thinking, “I wonder if he’s going to talk about that mistake in our readings.” You all caught the mistake, right? It seems there’s a glaring inconsistency between our reading from the book of Acts and our gospel lesson.

This inconsistency may be especially worrisome in light of the fact we’re fairly certain the same person wrote both books: Luke wrote both the gospel that bears his name and the book of Acts. Two books, same author, but the books say different things: so what happened? Did Luke forget something? Is there a problem here we need to acknowledge that might affect the way we understand what it is we’re doing here today?

Let’s make sure we’re all on the same page: what exactly is this inconsistency I’m talking about? Here it is: Luke gives us two rather different accounts of when the ascension of Our Lord actually happened. In the gospel that bears Luke’s name, when does the ascension happen? Very early on the morning of the day after Easter. But in the book of Acts, when does the ascension happen? Forty days after Easter. That’s a pretty big difference. What are we to make of this difference, and why might it matter to us and what we’re doing here today?

First, let’s very quickly review both lessons to make sure we have a clear grasp of the apparent difference between them.

Here’s how the story goes in Luke: early on the first day of the week, several women go to the tomb where Jesus had been interred but they find it empty. They tell the other disciples, but nobody knows what’s going on. Then two disciples have an encounter with Jesus while they’re travelling on the road to Emmaus; they return to Jerusalem and tell the other disciples. Then suddenly Jesus himself appears and demonstrates he has indeed been raised from the dead, and this is the point at which today’s gospel lesson picks up the story: he opens their minds to understand the scriptures, he commissions them to be his apostles, he instructs them to remain in Jerusalem until they have been “clothed with power from on high,” and then he leads them out of the city to Bethany where he withdraws from them and is taken up to heaven. So Jesus hangs around for maybe 24 hours after the resurrection before the ascension: that’s the story as told in Luke.

Here’s how the story goes in Acts: there’s no mention of the empty tomb, there’s no mention of the road to Emmaus, there’s no mention of his initial appearance to them. All of that gets compressed into a very brief summary: Luke writes, “after his suffering” Jesus presented himself alive to the disciples “by many convincing proofs.” Then he appeared *repeatedly* to his disciples over the course of forty days, “speaking about the kingdom of God.” At the end of this period, he leads the disciples out towards Bethany where he is taken up to heaven. And, of course, the book of Acts mentions the appearance of two angels to the disciples, something the gospel of Luke omits entirely: “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 you saw him go.”

Two accounts, same author, and the accounts seem to say different things. What are we to make of this, and does it matter for what it is we're doing here today?

The difference between the way the gospel of Luke describes the ascension and the way the book of Acts describes the ascension has everything to do with what Luke wants to say about the *meaning* of the ascension. In other words, Luke is much more concerned with the “so what” question than he is with the “when” question. *That* it happened he takes for granted; it's interesting, but he doesn't go to nearly the lengths he does to prove the ascension happened as he does to prove the resurrection happened. He simply assumes the ascension happened, and moves immediately to an explanation of its meaning.

And the key to understanding Luke's account of the meaning of the ascension is to be found neither in the gospel of Luke nor in the book of Acts, but—surprise, surprise—in the book of Leviticus...specifically, in chapter twenty-three of Leviticus. There we find instructions for observing some of the major festivals of the Jewish religious calendar. And right after the instructions for observing the Passover, we find this: “From that day after the [Passover] sabbath ... you shall count off seven weeks; they shall be complete. You shall count until the day after the seventh sabbath, fifty days: then you shall present an offering of new grain to the Lord.”

A bit of background: Israel had three major festivals that were holy days of great solemnity and importance. The first of these was Pesach, also known as the Feast of Unleavened Bread or Passover. The second of these was Shavuot, also known as the Feast of Weeks or Pentecost. The third of these was Sukkoth, also known as the Feast of Tabernacles.

All three of these observances were harvest festivals. During Passover, Israel celebrated the first, early harvest, the barley harvest. During Pentecost, Israel celebrated the later spring harvest, the wheat harvest. And during Sukkoth, Israel celebrated the final, fall harvest, which included olives and grapes.

All three of these observances also commemorated major events in Israel's relationship with God. During Passover, Israel commemorated their deliverance from slavery in Egypt. During Pentecost, Israel commemorated the giving of the Law by God at Mount Sinai. And during Sukkoth, Israel commemorated their wanderings in the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land, and especially the guidance and sustenance God provided during that time.

The period between these first two festivals—the period between Passover and Pentecost—was a time of great anticipation and preparation. Having remembered their deliverance from slavery, the people now prepared to receive the gift of the Law. God was about to give them the means whereby they would fulfill their identity as God's covenant people and live into the fullness of the blessing God had for them.

Luke uses these two major festivals—Passover and Pentecost—to frame his account of the ascension of Jesus. The real Passover, Luke says, was the death of Jesus on the cross. And the real Pentecost, Luke says, is the coming of the Holy Spirit. And between these two events Luke positions his account of the ascension.

In other words, Luke uses the ascension as an image of the anticipation and the preparations the people of Israel experienced between their remembrance of their delivery from slavery and their reception of the Law. What may appear to be an inconsistency is actually the elaboration of an important spiritual and theological point.

Luke saw the ascension as part of God's work of redemption. Just as Passover commemorates Israel's deliverance from slavery and bondage, so too do Christians commemorate the death of Jesus as humanity's deliverance from sin and death. Just as Pentecost commemorates the giving of the Law to Israel, so too do Christians celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit as the fulfillment of God's promise to give to them everything they need to be God's covenant people and live into the fullness of the blessing God offers. And in between the cross and the coming of the Spirit, Jesus continues his work of redemption by offering himself in obedience to the Father. The ascension is the preparation whereby the conditions necessary for the giving of the new Law, the coming of the Spirit, are made manifest.

In other words, together the incarnation and the ascension form a circle; the incarnation is one half of that circle, and the ascension is the other half. Through the incarnation, heaven comes to earth; through the ascension, earth goes to heaven. Through the incarnation, God makes the divine become human; through the ascension, God makes the human become divine. Through the cross, Jesus offers his sanctified humanity to the Father, and the result is the new life of the resurrection; through the ascension, Jesus once again offers his sanctified humanity to the Father, and the result is the new life of the Spirit. All of this is to say that the ascension is part and parcel of God's redemptive work, an integral and necessary part of the salvation God offers to us.

Which brings us to today: what exactly are we doing here, and how does what Luke says about the ascension inform our experience of the life of faith?

Part of what we're doing here involves commemoration: we give thanks for the ascension of Jesus and all that it means for us and for the world.

But that's only part of what we're doing here today: we're here not only to commemorate a past event but to celebrate something that is happening in the present, in us. Having bound us to himself first through his humanity and then through the Holy Spirit, Jesus takes us with him when he returns to the Father. In other words, we share in his ascension. And we do that more and more as we sanctify ourselves in obedience to him and thereby offer to God our humanity, conformed to the image of the risen Christ.

This is what Paul is getting at in his letter to the Ephesians: through the power of God, the Father raised Jesus from the dead and gave him authority over all things. That same power, Paul says, is the power that is now at work in you: you have been raised with Christ.

Paul extends this line of thinking in his letter to the Colossians. "Because you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind, set your heart, set your will, set your *whole life* on things that are above, not on things

that are on earth, because like Christ you have died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. And when Christ is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory” (Col 3.1-4).

What we do here this day is not only an act of remembrance; it’s also an act of participation, a sharing in redemptive work God has accomplished in Christ. When we offer our sacrifice of thanksgiving, the Eucharist of our lives, the sanctified elements of our humanity, we are raised to where he is. Salvation in his Name is to be proclaimed to all the nations, and we have been made witnesses to these things. So let us this day receive the blessing that he offers, that we may do the work he has given us to do, to the honor and glory of his Name. Amen.

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Trinity Episcopal Cathedral
Columbia, SC