

Ascension (Part 1 of 2)
Luke 24:44-53 / Acts 1:1-11
Colebrook Congregational Church
Ascension Sunday – May 17, 2015

Usually during a worship service, the Gospel reading is done last, after the readings from the rest of the Bible. Today was reversed, because the two readings were written by the same author as two parts of a continuous story, and meant to be read in that order. The Gospel reading was the very end of Luke, and the other reading was the beginning of Acts, which even pointed back to Luke.

When you take the two Books together, they represent the largest segment of the New Testament. Luke has contributed the most Christian Literature to the Bible. More than all of Paul's Letters combined and more than John's Gospel and Letters, even if you include Revelation. While we could read between the lines of the Epistles, without Luke, most of what we know about the Earliest Christians, would just be guesses.

Both Books are addressed to a “Θεοφιλος.” Θεος is the Greek word for God, and φιλος, which if you remember from last week, is a Greek word that can be translated as love or friend. Over the centuries, scholars have wondered who this Friend of God was. Some thought it was the brother of Roman Emperor Domitian or some other member of the Imperial Family who could not let their identity be known. Or a sponsor who wanted to be anonymous, or an early bishop in Antioch, or even Luke himself. The theory I like, with the most meaning for us today, is that Θεοφιλος refers to us, that Luke addressed his opus to us and is speaking directly to us, the Friends of God.

Luke's account of Jesus after the Resurrection has a couple of a differences from the others. Luke does not have any indication of time passing during those events, as if everything had happened on Easter Sunday. Also, whenever anyone in the New Testament refers to Jewish Scripture, they invoke the Law of Moses and the Prophets, and just those two sections. Here, Jesus makes the same invocation, but then adds, for the only time in the whole New Testament, a third part of Jewish Scripture, the Writings, by also invoking the Psalms. The Psalms have many references to the Messiah, and will be quoted more in the Book of Acts.

The last difference is where Jesus left the Disciples. Matthew has the Great Commission with them somewhere in Galilee; Mark has two endings, both involved Jesus sending them out to evangelize; John has a conversation between Jesus, Peter, and the Beloved Disciple, establishing the foundation of the church. Luke has Jesus parting from the Disciples in Bethany, then they returned to Jerusalem to worship God in the Temple, with a promise of something going to happen. A foreshadowing of Pentecost.

The whole account seems very rushed, much like Mark's Gospel, and does not really add all that much beyond the reference to the Psalms. It is like Luke is rushing to start the sequel, where he elaborates more details. It's almost as if a tv producer is somehow involved!

The Book of Acts starts with a recounting of the Gospel of Luke, especially the ending with those extra details. There is Jesus opening the eyes of the Disciples, who were always misunderstanding Him before the Resurrection, the many proofs that He was truly among them, and then laying the groundwork for Pentecost, which we will be celebrating next week.

Before that Baptism of the Holy Spirit, the Disciples had a question. They wanted to know when Jesus wanted to restore the Kingdom of Israel. Jesus says that it is not for them to know, essentially that God would do so when God chooses to do so. In that question, the Disciples are looking back to the distant past and far into the distant future, but Jesus doesn't want them focused on those things, so He redirects them to focus on the present. Jesus gives them the Commission to go out and be witnesses...once they receive the Spirit.

Jesus then departed. The Disciples just stood there, staring upward, or not doing anything. And then two people in white robes gave them a, "Move along! Move along!"

Jesus and the Disciples bring up a few issues, the obvious one, Jesus' Return carries over to next week and Pentecost, so I ignored that one, and focused on the rest.

What I see here, is that Jesus does not want us to be controlled by the past, but also not be overly focused on something that we have no control over, so focus on the present and the actions you can. Jesus was preparing the Disciples for Pentecost and their missionary work to spread their witnessing of the Good News, but the Disciples were too focused on the past and something they had no control over, a restored Kingdom of Israel. He tells them it's up to God to worry about that, it's not their concern. They should be concerned about the missionary work. And when they just stood around, doing nothing, two messengers prompt them to get moving.

In college, I joined a fraternity. Not of a type like the one in animal house, nor the type the you hear about in the news for doing something bad. This was a co-ed service fraternity, affiliated with the Boy & Girl Scouts, 4-H, and other service organizations. In my travels, I was able to observe some other college's chapter at work.

I was not certain of all the things that chapter was going through, but what I saw was efforts to try new service projects that deviated from what they had always done, were met with something I would describe as fear. Their leadership was not comfortable with anything that might interfere with what was traditionally done. And they also busied themselves in preparing for recruiting. I asked them for a calendar of that month's service and fellowship events, and was shocked to find that there were none planned. I was told by some of my Brothers & Sisters that they were discouraged, and separately on their own, a number of them, wanting to serve others, would go off and do service, but with other groups or by themselves. They hadn't done anything during that month, so they never planned to do that month. And that recruiting concern? It was for the next year. That chapter was so locked into how things had been in recent memory, that they could not comfortably deal with anything else, and so the present suffered as a result.

At the next meeting, during the announcements phase, I stood up and said that I was going that Saturday to volunteer at Habitat for Humanity, and if anyone wanted to join me, to see me after the meeting to arrange rides. After the meeting, I arranged a pick up point for my car, and talked their staff

advisor to drive as well. When I showed up at the college on Saturday to pick up my carload, I found a lot more Brothers and Sisters than I expected, and they had arranged rides as well, it was now their rally point.

The following meeting, someone else stood up and said they were doing a project, and to see her if anyone wanted to join her. And this continued to build while I was there. The traditional events continued, but they were reminded that they needed to act in the present as well.

The Chapter was too locked into recent traditions, like the Disciples were caught up in the past of the Kingdom. The past and traditions are not inherently bad. Jesus approved of Jewish traditions by invoking the Law, Prophets, & the Psalms, but did not want the Disciples to be bogged down. Like the saying goes, “Those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it,” but only when it is like an anchor, preventing one from acting on the needs of the present, is a refocusing needed, like how Jesus did to the Disciples. They didn't need to focus about concerns that they were not responsible for, just be ready to act in moment, to be concerned about the present concerns.

And Luke told us how two special messengers told the Disciples to move along, to not just stand around doing nothing. That special note is telling for me. God did not have to send those messengers, the Disciples would have dispersed eventually, but God did send them. To me, that means that God does not want us milling about, God wants us to go do something.

Coming here as just an Interim, I had not planned to start anything **new** in the community service area, because of the limited role of an Interim. But for the last week or so, that decision has been gnawing on me, and I want to do something about that. I am going to spend the next week trying to figure out what I can do to help serve our community, answering God's Call to do go do something. If anyone would like to join me, or if anyone has any ideas, please let me know.

Meanwhile, we should ask ourselves if we have any anchors that are holding us back from anything? Are we overly focused on anything that we need not be concerned about? And is there anything I can be doing right now?

Prayers of People

[PAUSE]

Loving, Jesus! The Ascension has set you free; free from the constraints of human existence, outside the limitations of time and space; free to be here with us now, in our worship and fellowship; and free to be with us always; for in your freedom you have bound yourself to us with a promise. We pray, for those who need to feel you close, who need the assurance of your love, and the encouragement of your Spirit. We pray for those who are persecuted, who are discriminated against, who are mocked because of differences. We pray for those who are destitute, who are hungry, who are refugees, because of the apathy of the world. We pray for those who are filled with guilt, who are broken-hearted, who are perplexed, because things have gone wrong. We pray for those who are feeling fed up, who are in discomfort, who are afraid, because they are ill in body, mind or spirit. We pray for those who are numbed, who are angry, who are desolate. We pray for those caught up in war, and violence, and hatred; especially the innocent victims of evils. We pray at this time of turmoil, for those who have lost jobs, those who struggle to pay bills, and those who have the power to affect positive change.

We especially pray for:

Be with us all, Lord: in all our daily struggles as we seek to follow you. Be with us all, Lord; in our periods of doubt and despair; and in our times of happiness, health and loving. Be with us all, Lord: until that time when your Love our joy will know no end: **AMEN**

Luke 24:44-53

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 worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; 53 and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Acts 1:1-11

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 over the course of 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 towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. 11 They said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards 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.’