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[First Christian Church Decatur](#)

“Why Do You Stand Looking Up Towards Heaven?”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Ascension Sunday, May 29, 2022

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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 our Creator 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 worshiped 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 domain of God. ⁴ While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Creator. ‘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 seasons that the Creator has set by God’s 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, ‘People 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.’

Sermon

A pastor preached on the power of the Holy Spirit
to enable folks to repent and forgive,
to bear witness and even love our enemies.
She expounded on the value of grace and forgiveness to all,
and how we are called to love our neighbors and our enemies
as much as we love ourselves.
Filled afresh with the Holy Spirit, the congregation was roused to action.
Sensing their excitement, she said,
*"Can I get a witness?
Raise your hand to God
if you vow to go out into the world and love your enemies!"*
Everyone raised a hand to the heavens...all except for one person.
From the pulpit the pastor could see that the lone exception
was a diminutive senior citizen in the front row.
Surprised and curious, she called out the woman,
asking, *"Why can't you love your enemies?"*
The woman responded, saying, *"Pastor, I can honestly say I have no enemies."
"That's incredible! May I ask how old you are?"
"96"
"96 years young, and no enemies? That's even more incredible.
Please, come forward and testify how you achieved this."*
She slowly moved to the front of the church, faced the congregation, grabbed a mic,
and said, *"I outlived all those snakes!"*

Wonder and Wildness

Ah, the wonder and wildness of the Holy Spirit,
God's generous gift to humanity,
given to clothe us with divine power
to love, to forgive, to witness,
and maybe even to help us to outlive all those snakes!

Wonder and Wildness

Today's passages speak of the Holy Spirit
with awe and veneration, surprise and reverence.
Our passages flow, one into the other.
The first passage before us is the conclusion of Luke, Chapter 24,
and the second is the introduction of Acts, Chapter 1.

The Gospel According to Luke
concludes with the departure of Jesus for heaven.

The Book of Acts, also written by Luke,
begins with the departure of Jesus for heaven.

In Luke's Gospel narrative,
the story is told that 3 days after the crucifixion,
Jesus was resurrected from the dead into life everlasting.
He returned to earth to reconnect with His followers,
even if only for a little while.

First Jesus connected with Mary, Peter and Thomas.
He then opened the scriptures for two disciples on the road to Emmaus.
He broke bread with His disciples by the sea.

Even so, the disciples don't get it.
Despite their joy at Jesus' sudden appearance,
they are still disbelieving and wondering.
Frightened by what happened and what might happen,
doubts arise in their hearts.
No wonder that when it came time for Jesus to ascend into heaven,
to say good-bye for now,
to bless creation with the Spirit,
He left them – and us – with a message.

Jesus 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."*

Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, 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,
and that repentance and forgiveness of sins
is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations,
beginning from Jerusalem.
You are witnesses of these things.
And see, I am sending upon you what our Creator promised;
so stay here in the city
until you have been clothed with power from on high."*

Observe that here, in the conclusion of His days on earth,
Jesus sums up the entire Gospel message in one sentence:
Repent, forgive, and be ready to be clothed with power from on high.

Tell me, what is it we wrestle with the most?
We can be honest with each other.

What do we need the most help with?
What spiritual disciplines do we struggle with the most?

Is there anything tougher to do than to repent?
What can be more difficult than to turn 180 degrees,
to turn away from intentionally sinning,
to turn toward intentionally getting in tune with God's Big Love?

Is there anything harder to be than a soul who forgives?
What can be more difficult than to be one who pardons,
who absolves enemies and betrayers,
who exonerates sinful sojourners and neighbors,
who lets go and lets God's Big Love take the point.

Yet – and this is really wild, and really wonder-filled –
here came God-in-Christ to show us how to trust, to trust in God,
to trust that when we turn away from harming or hurting,
wounding or bruising one another or ourselves,
there is always a God of grace to welcome us home,
to set us on a new course of action,
and send us forth,
forgiven and forgiving,
cleansed, refreshed and ready for action.

Thanks be to God,
Jesus of Nazareth invested His ministry and gave His life
to show us the way to repent and forgive.

Wonder and Wildness

Speaking of action,
the Book of Acts – also written by Luke –
begins with the story of Jesus' ascent to heaven
after a 40-day period of instructing His followers
and promising to send the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Clearly Acts is the sequel to Luke.
Clearly one book flows into the next, smooth as silk.
Clearly the disciples still don't get it.
Some things never change...or do they?!

*So when they had come together, they asked him,
'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?'
[In other words, 'Jesus, now that you rose from the dead,
are you going to toss out the occupying Roman colonizers?']*

Jesus replied,

*'It is not for you to know the times or seasons
that the Creator has set by God's own authority.
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.'*

Note that He redirects their energy -- the flow of their spiritual disciplines --
toward the holy, toward the church, toward one another.

Just as Luke concludes with Jesus summing up the Gospel,
the Book of Acts opens with Jesus summing up what is to come:
Be a witness.
Be clothed with the Holy Spirit.
Be present where you are.

The fact that Luke does this--

having two ascension of Jesus stories, back-to-back that differ slightly in context and
storyline—

shows that Jesus' ascension
is a theological message to the world:
God calls us to repentance,
to be forgiving,
to be witnesses,
and to empower us,
God blesses humanity with the Holy Spirit.

Wonder and Wildness

They say a child was caught up in the wonder of worship,
enraptured by the music,
awed by sights and sounds of people
so happy to be present in God's House.

To the child's parents, however,
their young 'un was being squirmy in church.
Dad scooped up the wiggly child and started down the church aisle,
headed toward the doors.

The child looked over his shoulder at the congregation
and called out, *"Y'all pray for me now!"*

The Spirit of God's prayer is for you and yours to be anointed with an amazing grace.

Jesus said, *"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you."*
You will...

You shall..
Expect to be empowered with the Holy Spirit.
The Holy Spirit is.
The Holy Spirit simply is.
Wild, wonder-filled, unpredictable, life-saving and life-affirming.
The Spirit is alive and well and living in you and me.
The Spirit has revealed itself to the whole people of God
through a myriad of forms, faces, and forces.

We are aware of a variety of understandings of the Spirit.
Isn't it wild that everyone has their own interpretation or experience of its meaning?

For the Gospel writer Luke,
it is through the Spirit
that God's followers will be clothed with power from on high.
The Spirit gives people the power to witness,
to forgive sins, heal, teach,
to strive for justice, cast out demons, and bear witness.
The whole people of God – personally and communally –
may be filled with this gift from on high.

For the Gospel writer John,
the names of the Spirit reveal its true nature and nurture.
The Spirit is known as counselor, comforter, and teacher.
According to John's testimony,
Jesus said that the Spirit is sent by God in Jesus' name.
The Spirit of God, the Paraclete, the Advocate,
dwells richly in you, and is a living, comforting presence in you.

For the Apostle Paul,
God sent the Spirit to claim us as God's own people.
Since we are children of God then, like Christ, we, too, are heirs:
heirs of the Cross as well as the glory.
In addition to coming to earth to claim us,
Paul teaches that the Spirit intercedes on our behalf
"with sighs too deep for words."
Paul's faith bears witness that we are to walk in the Spirit,
live in the Spirit
and set our minds on the Spirit.

These are but three of millions of experiences of the wonder of the Spirit.

For Buffy Calvert, my mother, the Holy Spirit counterbalances
God's strength and creative powers

by offering to and providing for the universe
a more maternal, nurturing side to the holy trinity.

What has the Holy Spirit meant to you?
What qualities have you experienced?
How has the Spirit made itself known to you?
Where has the Spirit of God led you in the past?
Where is it leading you today?

Wonder and Wildness

Our passage from Acts includes two men robed in white.

There are two robed in white in the Transfiguration:
Moses and Elijah, with Jesus.

There are two angels robed in white after the Resurrection:
angels at the empty tomb.

Now there are two men robed in white at the Ascension:
angels to escort Jesus to Heaven.

The two robed in white pause before departing
to speak with the disciples.
*'People 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.'*

It's like the ending of the movie Ferris Bueller's Day Off.
Ferris comes out after the credits.
He looks at the movie audience.
"You're still here? It's over. Go home. Go."

Disciples, go home.
Relax.
Trust God.
Share the wonder and wildness of God's Big Love.

Are you like me, sometimes getting stuck, overwhelmed, anxious,
maybe afraid that God has left us all alone?
Ever feel frozen, stuck, stationary,
looking up at the heavens,
waiting, eager for Jesus to return,
wondering about the end times?

Please, say the angels robed in white,

don't waste time or energy by gazing at the heavens,
awaiting Jesus' return,
when you are called – called! –
to be present and accountable here and now.

Be a witness.

Let the Spirit of God live in you, guide you
and empower you to repent, to forgive,
to witness what God has done for you and yours.

When we say witness,
we mean simply share what God has done for you
over the course of your life, in the past month, the past week.
It's really not that complicated.

Let the wonder and wildness of what God is doing in you to be released,
and then share your story.

Speak your truth.

Hear someone else's truth.

Listen to someone else's story,

and suddenly the two of you discover an ever-deepening grasp of God's Big Love.

Some things never change...or do they?!

Wonder and Wildness

People of God, why do you stand looking up towards heaven?

Better than that...

Repent!

Forgive one another!

Be a witness of the love you have received.

Now, in any and every which way you can.

They say that centuries and centuries ago

the Pope and the world's most renowned Rabbi agreed to meet.

Neither of them, however, spoke a common language.

Yet they wanted the meeting to be private.

So, the two spiritual icons decided to communicate using only hand signals.

The Pope began by making a circular motion with one hand.

The Rabbi responded by pointing down at the ground.

The Pope held up 3 fingers.

The Rabbi held up 1 finger.

The Pope took a sip from a chalice and ate a wafer.

The Rabbi pulled out an apple and took a bite.

After the two went separate ways,
the Pope's aides asked, "Well? What happened?"
"I waved my hand around to say, 'God is everywhere,' said the Pope.
The Rabbi pointed down to say, 'God is here.'
I held up 3 fingers to symbolize the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
He held up one finger to say, 'There is one God.'
I showed him the Body and Blood of Christ,
and he showed me an apple,
reminding me we all come from the Garden of Eden."
"He had me beat at every turn," sighed the Pope.

The Rabbi returned home and told a friend of his experience.
"I have no idea what happened.
The Pope waved his arm around to say, 'Get out of here!'
so I pointed down to tell him 'I'm staying put.'
He gave me 3 seconds to get out,
so I pointed at the door if he wanted to leave."
"Then what happened?" asked his friend.
"Then he pulled out his lunch,
I pulled out mine, and we broke bread together!"

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!