

May 12, 2024
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Acts 1:6-17, 21-26
Called Up and Called Out

We are in the last week of the season of Easter - the season between Jesus' resurrection and Pentecost. The Sunday before Pentecost we mark the ascension of the Lord, an event that occurred 40 days after the discovery of the empty tomb. This would actually put it last Thursday. Since it is not our tradition to come to services on Thursday, we celebrate it on the Sunday after – today. Ascension Sunday marks Jesus' last appearance to the disciples. It marks the transition of the mission of God being fulfilled by Jesus Christ the man to the mission of God being fulfilled by the church - the church being Christ's body here on earth after Jesus the Christ is no longer present. The ascension of the Lord is when we get our marching orders as a collective and the promise that we will be able to fulfill God's mission through the power of the Holy Spirit – a gift we acknowledge next week at Pentecost. Hear now these words from the book of Acts, chapter 1:

Acts 1: 6-17

So when they (that is the disciples) had come together, they asked Jesus, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his 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." When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They 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."

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying: Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

In those days Peter stood up among the brothers and sisters (together the crowd numbered about one hundred twenty persons) and said, "Siblings, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus, for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry."

.... **21-26**

“So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection.” So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. Then they prayed and said, “Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.” And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias, and he was added to the eleven apostles. **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

Ascension of the Lord Sunday doesn’t rank up there in the top church holidays for most people. There are no special decorations, no festive foods, no *Hallelujah* chorus. Ascension of the Lord Sunday can be a bit anticlimactic, and actually downright confusing. After all on Easter Sunday we joyfully proclaim - Christ is Risen! He is Risen Indeed. We sing *Christ the Lord is Risen Today*. The trumpets play. We are Easter people, Christ has triumphed over death. Alleluia. Amen!

So at Easter and onward we have this narrative that Christ has risen and our very human brains interpret that as Christ floating somewhere up above us; our understanding influenced by artists’ images through the ages. And then during the season of Eastertide we hear stories of Jesus’ appearances to the disciples after his death and resurrection - not just at the empty tomb, but to Cleopas and his companion on the road to Emmaus; to the disciples gathered, fearful, in an upper room; to Peter and the other disciples on the lakeshore, helping them to catch fish, cooking them breakfast and commanding Peter to feed his sheep and tend his lambs. So if we celebrate that Jesus rose from the dead on Easter Sunday, rejoicing in the promise of the empty tomb *that Christ the Lord is Risen Today*, what are all of these post-resurrection appearances about? Welcome to Ascension Sunday - the missing link so to speak in our journey from Easter to Pentecost.

Ascension Sunday is one of the oldest holidays celebrated in the Christian church. Augustine wrote about it in the early 400’s CE, noting that the celebration had been passed down from the earliest apostles, tied together with Easter and Pentecost. Cowie and Gummer in their book on the Christian calendar note that “the earliest celebration of Ascension Day seems to have originated in Jerusalem, when visiting pilgrims made a procession on this day in memory of the journey made by the Apostles from Jerusalem to Bethany and the Mount of Olives in continuation of the dramatic representations of Holy Week.”¹ For the early church, Ascension Sunday was considered “a unitive festival.” By tying together the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, **and the** gift of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, God’s work

¹ L. W. Cowie and John Selwyn Gummer. Ascension Sunday. *The Christian Calendar. A Complete Guide to the Seasons of the Christian Year Telling the Story of Christ and the Saints from Advent to Pentecost.* G & C Merriam Company, 1974; p96.

of redemption is unified.² Each of these events was necessary, yet taken individually, none were sufficient for God's plan.

There are very few things in life which are both necessary and sufficient. Oxygen is necessary for to live, but you can't survive on pure oxygen for long. Water – necessary to live – but not sufficient to sustain life. Both necessary and sufficient that is hard to achieve. In my former days as a biomedical researcher, I had a love-hate relationship with the term necessary and sufficient. Finding a protein that was necessary and sufficient for memory or high cholesterol or cell division was the Holy Grail of the research world because it meant you could then develop a drug or genetic technology that targeted the protein and cure Alzheimer's Disease or heart disease or cancer. One year I was attending a conference on the molecular underpinnings of learning and memory and the first five speakers all claimed that the molecule they studied was necessary **and** sufficient for learning new information or remembering past information. While the irony of sufficiency may not have been apparent to them, it was so striking to me. A colleague of mine and I decided to count how many times we heard that phrase at the meeting – we eventually gave up, instead sharing an eye roll or a laugh whenever we heard it. They all might have been correct about being necessary – but they all could **not** be correct about being sufficient. In the final analysis, there are a lot of “ands” that end up in the equation for how the brain encodes information and there are a lot of “ands” in the story of God's people.

Christ's resurrection, ascension, and the gift of the Holy Spirit were all necessary, and it took the combination of the three to be sufficient. We spend a good deal of time as a church talking about the significance of the empty tomb on Easter morning – death was defeated. Christ is living – remembering the words of the angel in the tomb. “Why do you look for the living among the dead.” And we rightly spend much time celebrating the birth of the church through the gift of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost – recognizing that we would likely not be gathered as a community of the faithful, without that event. But “ascension”? Was that really necessary?

The book of Acts is a continuation of the Gospel of Luke, volume 2, so to speak. Luke foreshadows the importance of the ascension in his description of the transfiguration, a story we heard way back in February on Jazz Sunday. While Matthew and Mark also include a passage on the transfiguration, Luke provides more depth and detail. He says that Jesus, Moses, and Elijah “appeared in glory” and that they were talking about “his departure” which he would accomplish in Jerusalem. The language of “the glory” and the cloud that took Jesus out of the sight of the disciples has deep roots in the Old Testament. Throughout the books of Exodus and Numbers especially we hear the presence of God represented as the clouds, whether it is God calling to Moses from the cloud, Moses climbing Mt. Sinai to receive the 10

² Arlo D. Duba. Caught Up in the Cloud. Rescuing the Ascension story from familiarity. *Reformed Worship* 55. March 2000. Online at <https://www.reformedworship.org/article/march-2000/caught-cloud>

commandments from the cloud of God, or the pillar of clouds descending to speak to Moses at the tent of meeting as we heard Stephanie read this morning.

“Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?”, the two men in white robes asked, reversing the question they asked on Easter morning. “Why indeed?” I can imagine the disciples answering in their minds, if not out loud. Jesus has risen from the dead and has been with us. This ascension is just temporary. He must be coming back. There is still work to be done. And the two men tell the disciples that Jesus has been called up – he has been taken up from them into heaven.

So the disciples return to Jerusalem. To wait. To wait for the promised Holy Spirit. They wait in prayer. And on one of the days, Peter understands that they must call a new disciple to replace Judas. There was a single eligibility criterion to round out the twelve: to have accompanied them during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among them beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up. The job description is simple: become a witness to Jesus’ resurrection. So out of the 120 who were there: two were chosen for further consideration: Joseph and Matthias. I appreciate that Luke, the author of Acts, reminds us that casting lots was a way to hear God’s call. He says, “Then they prayed and said, “Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which one of these two **you have** chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship.” And the lot fell to Matthias.

Now with this dramatic beginning – you can imagine the hushed breaths as the gathered crowd waited to see if the lots fell to Joseph or to Matthias – you might think that we are going to hear big things from this newest disciple. But alas, this is the last mention of Matthias in the books that make up our New Testament scriptures. That Matthias is an anonymous disciple after his calling makes him intriguing to me. In some ways his call is even riskier than that of the first disciples, for he knew that suffering and danger likely lay ahead. And despite those risks, Matthias accepted the call. The spirit’s call is often about taking risks, stepping outside of your comfort zone, outside of a predetermined path.

I can imagine Mary, the mother of Jesus, who Luke tells us was there that day, reaching over and putting her arm around Matthias, gently whispering to him, “Do not be afraid. Do not fear.” Words she heard so long ago and still pondered in her heart. These are words that mothers and mother figures through the ages have said to children as they were facing monsters in the closets, the first day of school, an unknown future. My own mom had a slightly different twist on this...she would say to me it’s ok to be afraid as long as that is the starting point and not the ending point. My mom was a psychologist – and sometimes her mom hat and her psychologist hat were interchangeable. I remember her telling me many years later about her decision to go to graduate school when I was seven and my two brothers were five and three. She didn’t know if she could do it – balance all of the competing demands for her time and energy. She was afraid. But she didn’t let it stop her – she and my dad plunged ahead – there were fits and starts and lots of creative solutions – but she did it –

and it gave her the confidence to open her own practice a few years later. It's ok to be afraid as long as that is the starting point and not the ending point. As long as it doesn't stop you from trying new things and taking risks. Wise advice from my mom that has helped me through the years when the spirit has called me to take risks. And advice, I can imagine, Mary the mother of Jesus saying to Matthias and the other disciples.

I can imagine Mary looking over this group of people who had become her family. Mary, understanding now better than the others that Jesus needed to leave in order for this group to grow into their calling to become Christ's body on earth. Mary, the mother Jesus, understood this community that now numbered 120 was shaped by the crisis of Jesus' death and resurrection. Their hopes had been buoyed by Jesus' post-resurrection appearances. And Jesus ascension into heaven was a flexion point. What would happen to the community? She understood that these ties can be tenuous, as our words of preparation from psychiatrist and author M. Scott Peck tell us: "Genuine communities of a sort frequently develop in response to crisis. ... The problem is that once that crisis is over, so - virtually always - is the community. The collective spirit goes out of the people as they return to their ordinary, individual lives, and community is lost." ³

Mary, the mother Jesus, understood that, as one commentator has noted, "the risen Jesus is presumably impervious to death, and so could have remained indefinitely. From this angle, the fact that he leaves reveals what sort of movement he has in mind: a community not standing around admiring him or merely waiting for him, but rather active and present in the world, carrying on his work of healing, justice, and proclaiming the dawn of God's joyous Jubilee. ... The church is a community that not only "follows" Jesus in the sense of listening to him and learning from him; we also are a community who "follows" Jesus in the sense of succeeding him, of taking up his mantle and carrying on his life and work."⁴

This is where we find ourselves on Ascension Sunday. Like the resurrection, Jesus' "call up" – his ascension from earth - is necessary for us to fulfill Christ's ministry, for us to accept the call to be Christ's body. Next week on Pentecost we will hear about the gift of the Holy Spirit. Added to the resurrection and the ascension, our call is completed. Necessary and sufficient. Join me in prayer.

³ M. Scott Peck. *The Different Drum. Community Making and Peace*. 1987. Simon and Schuster, 1987; p77.

⁴ Salt Project. Take the Baton. Salt's Commentary for Ascension Sunday. May 5, 2024. Online at: <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/5/17/ascension-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-ascension-sunday>