

Dunbarton Congregational Church
Sunday, May 4, 2008
10:30 a.m.

Ascension Sunday
Easter 7A

⁴⁴Then 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."

⁴⁵Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹And 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."

⁵⁰Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. ⁵¹While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. ⁵²And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; ⁵³and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Luke 24:44-53

In my former book, *Theophilus*, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.

On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven." Acts 1:1-11 (New International Version)

We have here in our scripture readings today two accounts of the Ascension of Christ written by the same author, as Mike would say, "Dr. Luke." Let's review where we are in

the Biblical narrative. Holy Week has come and gone. Jesus is buried in the tomb and rises on the third day just as he has promised. Yet he does not go directly to heaven, does he? He returns for forty days and forty nights, paying visits to Cleopas and his friend on the road to Emmaus, to his disciples, and, says Paul, to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time.” (1 Cor. 15:5) Then, after the appointed period, he gathers his disciples together and gives them one last set of instructions: 1. be my witnesses to all the nations, and 2. go back to Jerusalem and wait. Remember last week, Jesus made a second promise: that once he is gone for good, he will send an Advocate, the Spirit of truth, to guide and strengthen and comfort his disciples in their missionary work.

“Stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” He tells them in Luke. “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father has promised, which you have heard me speak about,” he says in the Book of Acts. Then ⁵⁰ he leads them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blesses them. And ⁵¹ while he is blessing them—“May the Lord bless you and keep you,”—he withdraws from them and is carried up into heaven, taken up before their very eyes, until a cloud hides him from their sight.

This Ascension is really quite dramatic, don't you think? Jesus escorts his disciples to a hilltop in Bethany overlooking Jerusalem, raises his arms for one final blessing, then tilts his head back and lifts off, just floats upward like a helium balloon, drawn skyward by some unseen power, maybe the power of God's love, so perfect and pure it sucks Jesus right up into the sky. I imagine the apostles shading their eyes, squinting upward in disbelief as Jesus grows smaller and smaller until *puff*, he disappears into a cloud, gone forever—again.

I can imagine a lot of things going through the minds of the disciples at this point, but joy is not one of them. The thought of them returning to Jerusalem, continually blessing God in the temple as Luke tells us in his gospel account seems far fetched to me. Luke must have gotten a weak response to this first ending, however, because in his second account, in Acts, two men dressed in white suddenly stand beside the disciples

on that hilltop. "Men of Galilee," they say, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven." So they return to Jerusalem as they have been instructed, to do and wait for yet another promise to be fulfilled.

Every year, these ten days between the Ascension of Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost make me jittery. Promises and more promises; God seems to be constantly testing us. He promises Abraham that he will be the father of all the nations, he promises Sarah a son in her old age, he promises Moses a Promised Land, he promises Elizabeth and Zachariah a child, he promises Mary that she will bear a holy son, and he promises Joseph that everything will be alright in the process. Jesus carries on the family tradition, assuring his followers that he is the Messiah, that he will not die but will rise on the third day, and now he is promising them that he will send them a Spirit, an Advocate, who will "clothe them with power from on high."

If I was a disciple, and, of course we all are, I would be weary of all this promising. The watching and the waiting, it's brutal. When will that shoe drop? When will one of those promises go unfulfilled? You never know. You never know! I mean, can you be absolutely 100% sure that God will do what he says he will? Our parents promised us lots of things when we were little, and we know how that turned out. And we do a lot of promising, too, with equally pitiful results. "I promise I'll be home early from work." "I promise I'll read you a story tonight." "I promise we'll go out to the movies and leave the children with a sitter." "I promise I'll have that report done in the morning, or make that phone call, or stop by and visit." "I promise I'll teach church school this year, or be there for that meeting, or show up on Sunday." If our own track records are any indication, there are not too many promises to be trusted these days. So we do what human beings have been doing since the beginning of time, we *project*. We project our own fallibilities and those of our parents onto God and quake at the sound of yet another promise and the potential it contains for disappointment.

If we dig a little deeper, it's not even the actual promise that matters, is it? What really counts is knowing that we live in a reliable world, a world we can trust in, that what someone says they will do, they do, that what God says he will do, he does. I think one of the reasons we are all so stressed these days is because we don't feel sure of anything. Will my bank fulfill its promise to keep my money or my mortgage safe? Will my employer fulfill his promise to keep my job safe, or give me some warning and take care of me if it's not? Will my government fulfill its promise to keep our country safe, our soldiers safe, our veterans safe, or our economy safe? Will my school fulfill its promise to keep my children safe? Is my neighbor safe? Is my church safe? Is my spouse safe? Am I a safe person? Do I keep the promises I make?

Jesus tells his disciples to return to Jerusalem and wait. There he will send them an Advocate, the Spirit of Truth, who will fill their hearts to overflowing with the strength and courage to bear God's Word in the world. And what a Spirit he sends, complete with gale winds and pyrotechnics!

My friends, whether it's ten days or ten thousand years, God always, *always* keeps his promises. What would happen, I wonder, if everyone on earth honored the promises they make, all of them and all of the time, the promises we make to our children, our loved ones, our friends and neighbors, our employees, our employers, our nation, our world, our God, ourselves? Listen to these familiar words:

Stopping By Woods On A Snowy Evening

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.
My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.
He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep

Of easy wind and downy flake.
The woods are lovely, dark and deep.
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

The disciples stand in spellbound disbelief, looking skyward from that hilltop in Bethany their woods filling up with Christ's absence. Jesus has disappeared for good into a thin cloud. Oh how lovely it all was, so dark and deep. They lower their heads and gaze into one another's eyes. Awakening from their reverie, they give the horse's reigns a shake. And yes, maybe they *are* filled with joy. The wagon lurches forward. It's back to Jerusalem for them, for *they* have promises to keep, and miles to go before they sleep, and miles to go before they sleep.

Amen.