

## **Acts 1:1-11**

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. 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; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

So when they had come together, they asked him, “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.”\*

## **Where are you Looking?** - May 29, 2022

*Acts 1:1-11*

We come now to the end of the Easter Season. Today we celebrate the Ascension of the Lord, the day when Jesus' physical time on earth comes to a close. A new chapter in the life of humanity was about to open just as that one was coming to a close.

Let's recall our journey over the past 40 days. The day Easter dawned was hardly a day of triumph. Rather it was a day of sorrow. Jesus disciples, both men and women, were gathered together more or less. They were using the room where they had their last supper with Jesus as a kind of gathering place. None of them were always there, but you could always find a few followers hanging out, reflecting, wondering, and yes, mourning the loss of their friend and teacher.

On Easter morning, Jesus was, for all they knew, dead. Dead and gone. The dreaded they had won. They, the Jewish religious establishment. They, the Roman government. They, even the they, the regular folks, who shouted "Crucify Him" only a few days before. They had won. Humanity's best hope was gone.

The followers knew that there would never be another man like Jesus. His love, his teachings, his healings, his way of accepting everyone — all that was gone. No one before him was quite like Jesus. No prophet, no king, not even Moses or Elijah could quite compare. Jesus' followers unquestionably knew that for the past three years they had been privileged to see and hear and experience things few other human beings had. The followers all knew they had been blessed.

And now, now on Easter Sunday, they knew that they, among all people, were the most deeply cursed. They were to be the most pitied of all. Everything they believed, everything they hoped for, everything they were looking forward to, everything — all of it was gone. Jesus was dead and for all intents and purposes, so were they.

So began that Easter Sunday. But suddenly, something odd, something completely unexpected. Mary Magdeline, showed up breathless at headquarters. "People," she shouted, "Jesus is alive! His tomb is empty. I've seen him. I've touched him!"

What! Impossible! She's crazy, that one. Wasn't she the prostitute Jesus saved from stoning? Wasn't she the one who anointed Jesus with expensive perfume? Wasn't she always hanging around, getting in the way. How could she see the Lord? No. Mary was just imagining things out of her sorrow, her pain. Boy, it would be great if she were right, but, no one rises from the dead.

However, I guess Peter and John were her friends and they thought they owed Mary the courtesy of checking out her story. So they went to the tomb and were dumbfounded.

Mary was right! The tomb was empty! Jesus was nowhere to be seen!

But, instead of seeing Jesus for themselves, Peter and John saw two beings dressed in clothes of dazzling white. Could they be angels? The angels told them, yes Jesus was alive. He had risen from the dead. He was alive and on earth and was going to Galilee where he wanted to meet up with them.

Now who was crazy? Mary? Peter? John? Or all of them?

The story of that first Easter closes on a note of ambiguity. There were several appearances of Jesus on that day to some of his closest followers. But still... things were different. Jesus could appear and disappear at will. He had a real body. He could be touched. He could eat and drink. Nevertheless the scriptures report that even those closest to him weren't 100 percent sure.

Yet, Jesus was alive and on earth and visiting and encouraging his followers. One of his tasks, even before preparing them to go out and proclaim the good news was to make sure they felt OK about themselves. After all, the gospels agree that Jesus' followers for the most part ran away after he was arrested. Peter dared show up at Jesus' trial, but when he was accused of being a follower of Jesus, Peter vehemently denied it, three times! Only a few of his female followers were there at the crucifixion. Jesus suffered and died without the consolation of his closest friends.

Jesus knew this. He even predicted it so he wasn't surprised that it happened. Nonetheless, Jesus had to help his followers work through their guilt and shame. He had to reestablish their relationship of trust. In short, Jesus had to assure his followers that he still loved them and still felt they were up to the task of spreading the good news. The disciples thought of themselves as losers. Jesus thought of them as friends called to share God with the world.

Jesus assured his followers that although he was leaving his earthly ministry, he was never going to abandon them, ever. They would never again experience the loss, the utter defeat, the total despondency they felt after Jesus' crucifixion.

Instead, Jesus assured them that his Spirit, God's Holy Spirit, would dwell in all of them always. They would know and feel the presence of God and therefore have the courage, faith, and ability to face all the obstacles the world was about to throw at them for spreading the good news. Jesus wanted his followers to know he was there. All they had to do was to ask God to make them aware of his abiding presence.

Is Jesus really with us or is all of this just a comforting fantasy? That is the point of this Ascension Sunday. On this day, Jesus transforms from just one individual to a Christ who is available to all people all the time.

Once again, the disciples experience something that confounded them. Jesus leaves in two ways. First Jesus leaves the earth. Second, Jesus leaves his followers in charge of continuing his ministry. It is now up to those on earth to carry on. But the good news is that they weren't by themselves. They were not alone. They were aware that Jesus was with them where it counts most, inside. Inside their minds, inside their hearts.

The question for us today is where are we looking for Jesus? On that Ascension day, the book of Acts reports that the disciples looked up to follow Jesus' ascent. But the reality was, as the angels pointed out, was that Jesus was not away from them, not floating up the sky, not vanishing like a lost balloon. No, the disciples didn't need to look outward anymore. To find Jesus, the only place they needed to look was within themselves. Jesus now lived in them. His mission was complete. With the Ascension, Jesus passed on his spirit to the women and men would extend his mission and ministry. Jesus was no longer just one person trying to change the world. Now, on Ascension Day, Jesus had dozens, if not hundreds to carry on. Jesus is alive because Jesus, the risen Christ, is alive in all of us.

Friends, as we look out on the world today, it is as easy to feel a sense of hopelessness about the human condition. Indeed, with the children shot in Texas, the churchgoers shot in California, the shoppers shot in Buffalo, the war in Ukraine, uncontrollable climate change, hatred and violence rising against non-white people, the collapse of the quest for objective truth by one and sometimes both political parties — the scandals, both financial and sexual, challenging the churches.

All this and much, much more can cause us to concede that evil is winning and Christ is nowhere to be seen. We can be like the disciples on Easter Sunday, people feeling desperate and powerless.

Yet as the events of the Easter season have demonstrated, Jesus' followers had no need to feel powerless, not then and not ever. Think of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances as his way of getting his followers off of training wheels and confident in their ability to ride a bicycle on their own. Jesus assured his followers that He was with them always from now to the end of the age.

Next week is Pentecost, the birthday of the Church. Next week is the proof that Jesus' followers took him seriously. Jesus told them that he was alive and he was with them and he could be found not far away but within themselves. The disciples looked and Yes! Jesus was there, guiding them, encouraging them, inspiring them to spread the good news.

But this story of the disciples on Ascension Day doesn't stop with them. By no means. Friends, the biggest problem we face as Christians is that we persist in non believing we are Jesus disciples today. We are no different from Peter or John or Matthew or Andrew or any of the 12 or any of the women or any of the hundreds who followed Jesus.

The spirit that was present in those disciples 2000 years ago is the very same spirit that lives in us right now! We are disciples, just like they were. And we can change the world, just like they did!

My friends, hear the good news! All of us are extremely gifted and talented people. You have a gift and you have and gift and you also have a gift. I don't know what it is. You might not even know what it is. Nonetheless, God has gifted us each with unique talents and abilities — talents and abilities to serve God, serve our world, serve our neighbors, and yes, even serve ourselves.

Christ's outpouring of power and love did not stop when he left the earth. It did not stop when those who witnessed his earthly ministry died. It didn't stop with the all those years ago. It didn't stop with them and it certainly doesn't stop with us!

Where are you looking friends? Are you really searching inside yourself to find Jesus' spirit within you? Because if you are, the Spirit will let you know how to use your talents and abilities. The Spirit will guide you to be Jesus ministering to some need in the world. The Spirit will fill you with confidence to go and do whatever it is you need to do to be Christ to this truly messed up world.

No one person can solve all the problems of the world. No one person can summon the resources and will to make real change happen. Jesus himself could not do that. All he could do was raise a band of supporters whose individual efforts could start to make a difference. The fact is, those first disciples believed to the depth of their beings that they were doing the work Jesus had appointed them to do. They felt the calling in their hearts. They experienced the ideas and guidance in their minds. They knew the companionship of friends to journey with them. And they exuded the confidence of knowing God in Jesus Christ was on their side.

There is no reason, no reason at all my friends, that we also cannot do what those first disciples did. We today all have a calling. We, today, all have a mission. We, today, all have a ministry. We, today all have access to the people and resources we need to change the world. We, today, don't have to be afraid. We, today, will seek and find, will knock and see doors opened, will ask and receive.

All we have to do, all we have to do, all we have to do is look for Christ where Christ lives. It's time to look inside ourselves.