

Next month is the 50th anniversary of Apollo 11 and man's first footsteps on the moon. Virtually every TV set in the country if not the world was tuned in as we watched in wonder the miracle of space travel unfold. And the work behind the scenes captured our imaginations too: We imagined what it must've been like to train to be an astronaut. In a similar way I think the disciples watched Jesus ascend into heaven. They were enthralled. They were enchanted. And they were captivated by the hand of God that made it all happen. This morning we're going to talk about these things and explore what it all means for our walk with God and with one another.

OPENING PRAYER

ACTS 1:1-11

The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, ² until the day when He was taken up *to heaven*, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen. ³ To these He also presented Himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over *a period of forty days* and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God. ⁴ Gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, "Which," *He said*, "you heard of 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 were asking Him, saying, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷ He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; ⁸ but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth."

⁹ And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. ¹⁰ And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was going, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them. ¹¹ They also said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven."

Luke began the Acts of the Apostles, writing, "**The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach" (v.1).**

Theophilus means "dear to God," which is a great name for a person who loves God. In his Gospel, Luke addressed him as the "**most excellent Theophilus**" (Luke

1:3). He was probably a politician, someone of great importance and power. Let us pray that each one of our leaders would be a “Theophilus,” one “dear to God.”

In verse 2, Luke wrote, **“(Jesus) was taken up to heaven, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen.”**

In his Gospel, chapter 24, Luke recorded the orders Christ gave the apostles by the Holy Spirit. **“He said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day,⁴⁷ and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things.⁴⁹ And behold, I am sending forth the promise of My Father upon you; but you are to stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high”** (Luke 24:45-49).

That’s it: be witnesses of Christ’s work for the **“forgiveness of sins”** for all nations after **“you are clothed with power from on high.”** Those are the orders from Father God headquarters.

When I lived in Philadelphia, I attended a church that was very engaged in social justice issues. Every week the pastor preached about our personal responsibility to make a difference in the world, from our neighborhood to the pinnacles of the federal government. Which is just fine when you’re flying high, when you’re at the top of your game. But I was facing an internal crisis in my work. And what the pastor was preaching did not help me; he wasn’t speaking to my heart. So I went on an adventure, looking for a Christian church which spoke to people who are broken.

On my adventure, I attended every kind of church in the city—big churches and small churches, churches of every denomination and non-denominational sect—I explored them all until I finally landed in another Lutheran church. It was a small congregation with a preacher who was older than dirt. He was not particular eloquent nor charismatic. He spoke so softly you had to sit close to the pulpit to hear him. But what he said was filled with power. He preached Jesus died on the Cross for me, that he shed his blood for me, that he gifted me with a new heart and a new of mind, and that he loved me. That was what I needed to hear, that God was with me, that he had never left me, that I belonged to him, and that nothing could take that away from me.

That's the word that saved my heart; that's the word the disciples were commissioned to share with all nations; that's the word you and I have been **"clothed with power from on high"** to carry forward, to plant in our community. As I've said before, we can give away food 7-days a week, but if there's no saving Gospel to accompany it, we're no different than another community service program.

Luke wrote, **"(Jesus) also presented Himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God" (v.3)**

As an historian, Luke was careful to pin the highlights of his story to historical events which others could verify. He wanted his readers to know that the things he wrote about really happened, that they were not fables, and one should seriously consider the implications of Christ's ministry for his own life.

The **"appearances"** between resurrection and ascension Luke alluded to were recorded by St. Paul in his first letter to the church in Corinth. He wrote, **"(Jesus) appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now...; ⁷then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles" (1st Corinthians 15:5-7).**

This is a good argument for skeptics. Even liberal scholars place the date for this writing in the middle of the first century, which means people who personally knew Jesus and his disciples were still alive to read it. So if this reporting was not true, they would have written against it. But there is no evidence that anyone ever did even though Christians were called the enemy of the people by the Roman and Jewish authorities. Indeed, they could not deny the eye-witness testimony of Christ's resurrection and ascension.

Luke wrote that **"(Jesus) commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, 'Which,' He said, 'you heard of from Me; ⁵for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now"** (vv.4-5)

The Father promised that the disciples would receive the Holy Spirit. Jesus fleshed out this promise. In John's Gospel, he said, **"When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, that is the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the**

Father, He will testify about Me, ²⁷ and you will testify also, because you have been with Me from the beginning” (John 15:26-27).

It’s all about Jesus, **“the alpha and the omega,”** the beginning and the end. There’s no other Gospel, no other Good News. He is **“the way, the truth, and the life.”** He is **“the light of the world,”** the **“bread of life,”** he is the literal embodiment of God’s love. That is our testimony.

I think it is rare that a person is converted to the faith because they were outmatched by someone with a convincing argument for Christ’s divinity, as if logic and reason could transform a person’s heart. Rather, the testimony we have for God’s love of us is what can touch them, can help them when they are down, encourage them when they are alone. The Holy Spirit works in us that we might be vulnerable to the people in our lives and to reveal how God’s love in our own hearts gave us hope.

Luke wrote, **“So when (the disciples) had come together, they were asking (Jesus), saying, ‘Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?’ ⁷ He said to them, ‘It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; ⁸ but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth” (vv.6-8)**

The disciples had been with Jesus for three years, had seen him suffer and die on the Cross, had witnessed his resurrection, and he’s been with them for almost 6-weeks in his glorified, exalted state, and they were still asking him about the restoration of Israel? Amazing! Despite everything he’d done and said, they continued to long for power and dominion over the Romans! But we’re sometimes like them, aren’t we? We want our country to be a “Christian country.” But who doesn’t? Well except for the “bad guys.”

Unfortunately, God did not promise that he would rule our nation. Ever since Israel declared they wanted a king instead of God as their ruler 3,000 years ago, God has always entrusted the political rule of his people to secular authorities.

But we are not without a leader. Jesus explained to the disciples earlier that the Kingdom of God was already in their hearts (Luke 17:21). God’s rule is not earthly or political, but it is heavenly and relational. God’s rule is not about power, but it

is about peace and salvation. As Paul preached later in Acts, **“the Lord has commanded us, ‘I HAVE PLACED YOU AS A LIGHT FOR THE GENTILES, THAT YOU MAY BRING SALVATION TO THE END OF THE EARTH’” (Acts 13:47).**

To be **“light”** for **“salvation,”** that is our calling.

Luke wrote, **“after (Jesus) had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. ¹⁰ And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was going, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them. ¹¹ They also said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven’” (vv.9-11)**

Christ was lifted up before the disciples and enveloped in a cloud. But it was not an ordinary cloud, as in a big, fluffy cloud into which he disappeared! But it was the shekinah glory of God! It was the cloud of light, the very presence of God as witnessed by Moses on Mt. Sinai, the same cloud that led Israel across the wilderness from Egypt, the divine cloud that enveloped the disciples when they witnessed their Lord’s Transfiguration. When Christ comes again, he won’t come riding in on a cloudbank in the sky! But he’s going to come with awesome majesty, light, and God’s glory for judgment and for redemption.

In his letter to the church in Ephesus, Paul wrote about Christ’s resurrection and ascension and what it is we should expect between now and the Second Coming. He wrote that **“(The Father) raised (Jesus) from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly *places*, ²¹ far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. ²² And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, ²³ which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all” (Ephesians 1:20-23).**

Let’s pray this, that the Lord would be our **“all in all,”** that his Spirit would reside in each one of our hearts and minds, that he would dwell in the hearts of the adults and children of our preschool and after school program, that everyone who visits our campus would be overcome by the awesome love of God they see in his people in this place.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, this week may our Lord's kingdom thrive among us; may we live in faith, with love, and in hope as a sign to our neighbors that our God reigns among us.

And this week let us take the opportunity to share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.