

7th Sunday of Easter, May 21, 2023
Acts 1:1-14

Pastor Chris Repp
Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, Illinois

Alleluia, Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed, Alleluia!)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

Following the account of the Book of Acts that tells us Jesus spent 40 days with his disciples after his resurrection and then ascended into heaven, the church has traditionally celebrated the Ascension 40 days after Easter, which is always on a Thursday. It's one of the major festivals of the church calendar, right up there with Epiphany and Transfiguration. Before the pandemic hit us three years ago there had been some discussion among the three ELCA congregations in Champaign-Urbana about holding a joint Ascension service, and we had decided we would do that in 2020. Finally, this past Thursday, the idea of a joint ascension service became a reality. A few of you were at Good Shepherd for that, and afterwards I agreed that Grace would host the service next year. So put that on your calendar. A tradition has begun.

Anyway, I bring all this up because this morning I am again going to focus on Jesus' ascension and what it means for us. And that's because it's the text that really grabs me today, and that I think speaks well to our task as the church in our time. So this might feel a little repetitious to those of you who came to the service on Thursday, since Pastor Paul Chapman also addressed this morning's text. I like where he ended up with his sermon, but I'm going to go in a bit of a different direction than he did and talk about how this reading from Acts chapter 1 is a little like the story of Goldilocks and the three bears. You remember that one, where Goldilocks invades the home of a family of bears and tries out their chairs, their porridge, and their beds, where one chair is too big, one is too small and one is just right, where one bowl of porridge is too hot, one is too cold, and one is just right, and so on. I think I'm in good company in applying this story to other things, since astronomers use it to talk about the habitable zone for exoplanets, where being too far from a planet's star makes it too cold for life, being too close makes it too hot, but in a certain band in between, it's just right for life as we know it. For my purposes, this fits the message of our first reading this way: at the beginning of our reading the disciples are too focused on earthly things. Then after the ascension, they are too focused on heavenly things. Jesus, and then the two men who appear after his ascension, are steering the disciples into a Goldilocks zone of holding these two tendencies in tension, and it is there that the church is most faithful and most effective. Let's see if we can make sense of that.

So first, the earthly pull. I've been talking about how it took the disciples a while to come to grips with the reality of his resurrection, to wrap their heads around the fact that his crucifixion had not been the end of his story as everyone expected. Now that that new, strange reality has sunk in, the disciples remember that Jesus had been promising to usher in the kingdom of God. It becomes clear here in our reading that they understood this to be a restoration of the kingdom of Israel. So they want to know, "Is this the time? Is this when you're going to make us great again?" Their imagination is stuck on an earthly kingdom and a return to the supposed good old days of the "before time." Jesus responds that they don't get to know the timetable. Now, as someone who has helped to raise three children, I learned early on that sharing your plans, telling the kids what the day was going to look like, what we were going to do and when, helped them a lot. It made them less prone to being anxious or impatient. So if I were Jesus, I would have told them the schedule. But I'm not Jesus, and so I might be missing that learning to live with the uncertainty might be one of the points of what is going on here.

Second comes the heavenly pull. After they witness Jesus ascending into the heaven, the disciples stand there staring up into the sky. Which of course you would do when you've never seen someone fly away like that, especially if like them you had never seen an airplane or a helicopter. We don't know how long they were standing there doing that, but it could have been quite a long time. I think I've shared before my realization during my only trip to Israel 22 years ago, after walking up the supposed mountain of the ascension in the heat of the day, that what take up only a verse in the Bible, "Jesus and the disciples went up the mountain," actually involves a fair amount of time and effort. So it might well have been a long time indeed that the disciples stood there looking up into heaven. What would they have been thinking? How would it compute? Maybe, they thought, maybe that kingdom that Jesus was talking about is up there in heaven where God is, and where Jesus just went? If that wasn't what the disciples themselves were thinking at that moment, it is certainly where many people in the church went in their imagination in the centuries to follow, particularly when Jesus didn't come back as quickly as they expected him to. And so the message of the two men who are suddenly standing there – maybe they just didn't notice them walk up since their attention was directed elsewhere – their message is not only for the first disciples, but for all subsequent disciples as well, us included. "Why are you looking up into heaven?" They were reminding them of Jesus' last words to them: "you will be my witnesses." So the men's question was a loaded one. It meant, "don't you have other things to be doing?"

That brings us to the Goldilocks zone, the space *between* earth and heaven to where the disciples are called. Just what is it that the disciples are supposed to be doing now? What's the one thing Jesus instructed them to do? It's not in this reading this morning, but at the very end of Luke's Gospel, to which the Book of Acts is a sequel. If you were with us on Thursday, you heard it read: "Stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." Notice the distinction between what *they* are supposed to do and what Jesus is *promising* to do. They are supposed to wait. The Greek word literally means to be seated. And what do they naturally do while they are waiting? They worship, they hang out together in the temple and in each others' homes, blessing God and praying, waiting for Jesus to do what Jesus is going to do: send the Holy Spirit upon them.

And that, dear sisters and brothers, siblings in Christ, is where we find ourselves as the church, set between heaven and earth, with our feet firmly planted on the ground, embedded in our earthly context, in the world that God has loved so deeply in Jesus Christ, while at the same time also caught up in the kingdom of God that is already breaking in all around us. In Holy Baptism the Holy Spirit *has* come upon us. We reemphasized that with Veronica this morning at the beginning of the service in her baptismal welcome. But the power that comes with that gift of the Spirit is God's work and not ours, which comes again and again when we gather for worship, for pondering the scriptures and proclaiming the gospel, in our praying and in our mutual conversation and consolation, in our witnessing to each other so that we might also witness to the world around us. God is at work here with God's power in this Goldilocks zone of the church so that God's life may abound in us and be shared with the whole world.

May God grant us grace to stand faithfully in the tension of our calling, the peace to keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus while sharing God's love with the world, and witnessing to the life-giving good news that Christ is risen, Alleluia! (Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia!)