

Luke 24:44-53 ~ Acts 1:1-11

*Now What?!*

May 24, 2020 ~ Ascension of the Lord ~ High School Senior Recognition

The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

*Introduction to Scripture*

We know that each Gospel writer of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, tells the story of Jesus' life on earth differently. They contribute their own perspective that adds texture and color to our picture of Christ. We may *not* know that one of our Gospel writers, Luke, has written two different accounts of the very same story: the story of Jesus' final words to his disciples and his ascension into heaven. You just heard Jim Aue read the first account at the end of Luke. That one took place on the evening of Easter near Bethany. I am about to read the second one, at the beginning of Acts, which Luke sets forty days later on the Mount of Olives. Luke's own fluidity with these details invites us to resist the limitations that literal facts might inflict on this wild and mysterious event.

I invite you to notice both what is the same, and what is different in Luke's two telling's of Jesus' ascension. One is an ending, the other is a beginning. Together they place us in what I would call "the land between." One final note before we hear this text: Luke opens his Book Two of Luke-Acts with a greeting to a person named "Theophilus" which literally means, "Friend of God." I invite you to consider yourself to be the "Theophilus" or "Friend of God," who is being addressed this day.

*Sermon*

The day I gave birth to my first-born child is, of course, a day I will never forget. Nor will my husband. Our whole lives changed one hot, sticky August morning. We had a new calling: new identities, new jobs, we had become parents. To tell you the truth, being the youngest in my family *and* never having done much babysitting, I was kind of scared of babies. For one thing, they don't talk. For another, when they are first born, they hardly look human. And so, we were thrilled to have my mom arrive the day after our baby Emily was born. Having raised four babies, she was an expert mom. She could show us what to do with this new and mysterious miracle we were now responsible for.

As exciting and memorable as the day of Emily's birth (she was born almost 3 weeks past her due date), I remember the day my mom went home which at the time was the country of Trinidad. Obviously way too far for her to pop on over if we had a problem. This was 1987, long before internet or Zoom could bridge the distance. There we were, feeling inadequate and now bereft of immediate assistance. Our baby Emily looked so trustingly at us with her enormous blue eyes. She didn't have a clue that she had been born to a couple of rank amateur parents. But we did. As we put my mom on her plane home, I felt a shiver of confusion and panic. Now that mom was gone, what were we going to do? Now, what?!

Both of our scripture lessons this morning, tell two different versions of the "Now, what?" moment for Jesus' disciples after their Lord and Teacher, the Risen Christ, exited the earth's surface for the last time. In both stories they were given instructions and a promise. You

may have noticed that in neither of these stories does Luke tell us precisely how Christ ascended from where he was standing, up into the clouds. Nor is that literal detail important to the story. Let us resist the temptation to major in the minors. This story is not about the mechanics of lift off—or material for an episode of, “Without a Trace” “X Files,” “The Society,” or “Future Man.”

It is a story about God’s wrap-around presence, mercy, and Love: revealed and embodied in our Lord Jesus Christ. The early church codified this promise back in the 4<sup>th</sup> century with these words, “He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.” This sentence from the Apostles’ Creed ties things up neatly. Christ has come full circle. We can be grateful and joyful at the triumphant and exalted Christ. Yay!

At the same time, it is also a story about what we don’t know. What we are *not* told-- no matter how many times or how many different ways we may ask. “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” Did you hear how Jesus replies? “It is not for you to know the times or periods set by the Father.” Rather, it is a story that can help us understand how to live fully, faithfully, and fruitfully in “the land between.” The land of “Now, what?!” When one chapter has ended and what’s ahead is unclear. Especially on this Ascension Sunday in 2020, after seventeen centuries of celebrating this event, instruction about how to live in “the land between” seems timely.

Jesus’ friends were living in the land between Jesus’ final exit and ascension into heaven and the coming of the Holy Spirit. “Not many days from now.” Let’s be honest: Don’t we all find that kind of answer, especially when we really want to know exactly when, frustrating? Today, as we honor our high school graduates, and college graduates in the class of 2020, they too (and all who love them) are acutely aware of this land of in-between in the midst of the pandemic. So many of the excellent jobs and internships that were lined up, so many acceptances to colleges and grad schools, hover in a cloud of uncertainty. Career paths of many may be altered in the wake of this current crisis. All of us, I believe, are riding the corona coaster, up and down and all around with burning questions about when can we do what? What is safe, and what isn’t? How do we know when to forward into God’s plan for our future?

Can’t you picture the not quite yet Apostles, standing there at the Mount of Olives, asking the wrong questions, scared out of their wits, tired of waiting, and terrified of what Jesus may be calling them to do. “Now, what?” inflection points occur more often than we would choose. Graduating is an exhilarating moment of accomplishment. The birth of a baby, also a thrill. Or finally reaching the point of retirement. Those are turning point we can anticipate and have time to prepare for. We also face “now what?” moments that come out of nowhere. Moments when we receive a devastating cancer diagnosis, or the sudden break-up of a family occurs, the unexpected death of a loved one, or the loss of one’s business or livelihood.

I find hope and direction in Christ’s answer to them and to us. Hope and purpose for every day we are blessed to live on this earth. In the Luke story, Jesus’ final gesture and word is blessing. That blessing is for you, too. In God’s kingdom, we will not be laid off, furloughed or

fired: Jesus' calls us to, blesses us with, full employment. In every sense of the term. Every person given work, good work to do in the bringing about God's kingdom on earth. Work that fully engages the best parts of ourselves. Work that only we can do to spread the light and healing of God's love.

How can that be? Luckily, when Christ looks at us, he sees something very different than what we see. When Christ looked at those eleven disheveled, disoriented disciples, he saw the beginnings of the church. And here we are 2,000 years later on the other side of the world. What do you think Christ sees when he looks at you? Christ, doesn't see our mess ups and does not buy our negative self-talk. Christ sees what the power of the Holy Spirit unbound, working through you can do. When Christ looks at FPC, he sees what more the power of the Holy Spirit unleashed within and among us could do to address the hurt and hate that bedevil our world and contradict his mission of unified Love.

At the same time, I hear Christ calling us to trust the timing in our lives, the planning, and the fulfillment of those plans to our Risen Savior. When and how to return to church. When and how to realize the vision of our country where no citizen has to choose between voting and safety. When and how to fulfill the vision where the hungry are fed, and the homeless are housed; where refugees find refuge. The answers to these questions do not begin with "when" and "what," but rather with "who" and with "how." Those answers were given to us by Christ two thousand years ago: From the moment of his birth to the last moments before his ascension into heaven.

My husband Bob and I love to bicycle together especially along quiet roads far from the beaten path. When our girls were growing up, the four of us logged countless miles on two tandem bicycles, over hill and dale in our home state at the time, Ohio. We had no clue about our future calling to Wisconsin, when we spent our first night in Marshfield with our then grade school girls in our tent, midway through a week long "Bike Wisconsin" bicycle tour. As you ride along, one of the unwritten "rules of the road" when you are out there is that if you see another bicyclist stopped on the side of the road, peering anxiously at their bike that appears to have broken down, you ask them (even if you'd rather not lose your momentum and have to actually stop), nevertheless you always ask them, "Do you have what you need?" Meaning literally, do you have the tools and wherewithal to get your bicycle up and running again. Do you have what you need to continue your journey forward?

My friends, because of Christ, we have what we need. Whether we feel like it at this moment or not, we truly do. The healing power of Christ's love, the Holy Spirit within and around us can patch any flat tire and replace every broken spoke. The Holy Spirit pumps us up and gets us going again. Perhaps on a different road. Often with a new perspective. And not without pain or sacrifice. But that is the story of Jesus. And that is the essential message I hear in the story of his Ascension.

Having finished his work on earth, Jesus had given them what they needed. He opened their minds and widened their perspective. He taught them and us: we are not the center of the universe. It is not all about us, or our family, or our nation. It's about sacrifices and suffering for the good of the whole, knowing we are an essential part of the story. A glorious thread in the rich tapestry that is the world that God so loved.

I hear Jesus saying to his bewildered disciples then and now: "Look where I am, look where you are in this story, our story." We have been clothed with Holy Spirit power *to continue the story of God's healing love* that began with creation. We are all part of a much bigger story than we could ever comprehend. Nor do we need to. Right here, in "the in between," when admit that we don't know what comes next, this is where God grows our spirits. This is where we learn to trust the One, the only One who loves us unconditionally. The One who sees who we could be, if we trusted Christ, just a little more each day.

Praise be to our ascended Christ, who is with us every step and misstep we take.