

May 17, 2026
Seventh Sunday of Easter
(Ascension Lections)
Trinity, St. Louis
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

Acts 1:1-11

Psalm 47

Ephesians 1:15-23

Luke 24:44-53

Alleluia. Christ is risen.
The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!

This morning, although it's the 43rd Day of Easter, and we are still feasting, we celebrate a principal feast from the 40th Day of Easter, the Ascension of Jesus into heaven. It's a feast that often passes us by, likely because it's always on a Thursday. Today, we get to hear about the Ascension two times, first from the Acts of the Apostles, second, from the Gospel according to St. Luke.

Because of the way the books of the New Testament are ordered – Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and Acts – it's easy to forget that Luke and Acts come from the same writer. Maybe you scratched your head when you heard *In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven*. That first book is what we call the Gospel of Luke. It might be called "The Story of Jesus on Earth." Acts (the second book) is the sequel, "The Story after Jesus leaves the Earth."

Since the time these books were written, scholars have spilled oceans of ink trying to figure just out who Theophilus was. Perhaps it was an attribution to someone famous, who may or may not have existed, in order to give the book a certain authority. Perhaps it was a real person, a government or religious official. Then I remember that Theophilus means, literally, *Friend of God*, and I like to imagine that it was written to be read by any friend of God. Maybe you. Maybe me.

What is clear is that, for Luke, the Ascension of Jesus is the inflection point in the life and ministry of the Apostles. It was the hinge between the before and the after of the earthly life of the human Jesus.

People of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?

The Ascension of Jesus is one of only two such events recorded in the Bible, the other being that of Elijah with his famous chariot of fire (2 Kings 2). Elijah rode off into the whirlwind while a company of fifty prophets watched. The Ascension of Jesus was also a witnessed event. No one saw the Resurrection, and from the time that the women discovered the empty tomb, Jesus' appearances to people were here-again-and-gone-again events. The

Ascension was different. Had Jesus simply vanished from sight, the Apostles may have expected him to come back a few days later. This time, they watch him go, feet and all.

We humans tend to make every story about ourselves; I don't think it's just me. In this case, however, the Ascension is actually about us. It is about our createdness, our humanity. The Ascension teaches us something profound about what God has done to us and for us in Christ. In the Ascension, "humanity finds room in God forever."¹

In Christ, God entered into and transformed our humanity, with all of its selfish fear and muddle-headedness. Christ didn't just give us spiritual first aid and then leave us staring up into the sky with our mouths open. Jesus was not some kind of heavenly superman who flew in, saved the day, and flew out.

Jesus became one of us, he died for all of us. He transformed us, and in the Ascension has taken our humanity to himself, into the center of the divine life, into the very heart of God. This, my friends, is the entire message of the gospel.

There is, of course, a seminary word for this: divinization; or, if you're old-school, the Greek term is *theosis* (θέωσις). This is not such a familiar concept today, I am sad to say, and you might be tempted to think that it's one of those "old medieval made-upy" things.

However, as early as the late 2nd century (the 100's) Irenaeus (c. 130-202), the bishop of Lyon, wrote that "the Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ ... through His transcendent love, became what we are, that He might bring us to be what He is Himself".²

Another way of saying this comes from Athanasius of Alexandria (d. 373) in the early 4th century. "Christ was made human so that he might make us children of God."³

Do you remember those pneumatic tubes that the post office and department stores used to use? Some drive-up banks still do. This is the image I have in my head: when Jesus ascends to God, we are (quite literally) drawn up with him into the very heart of God.

What if that image – the image of *theosis* – were the basis of our faithful living, rather than the current cultural norm that we are all just crabs in a barrel, scrabbling to get out only to be pulled back down? Or that Christianity is some sort of reality show where we compete to please God, because the seating is limited? What if we could be witnesses of a Christianity that proclaims that "humanity finds room in God forever"?

What would that faith do to the way we live in the world? To live in hope rather than fear? To see that all our neighbors are as we are ... beloved children of God? To wish and work

¹ https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2009/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20090524_cassino.html

² Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, book 5, preface - *Factus est quod sumus nos, uti nos perficeret quod et ipse.*

³ Athanasius, *De incarnatione* 54,3, cf. *Contra Arianos* 1.39.

for them every good thing that we want for ourselves without trying to make them carbon copies of us?

At the end of Luke's gospel, Jesus reminds the disciples of all of God's promises that had been fulfilled in Him, saying *You are witnesses of these things*. Then Jesus transforms them from disciples, or students, into apostles, or messengers, whose new task is to proclaim the good news of God in Jesus to all nations. On this day, in this place, we are also witnesses of these things.

Us? Witnesses? Really? Annie Dillard wrote about this uncertainty in her 1988 book *Holy the Firm*:

"A blur of romance clings to our notion of these people in the Bible, as though of course God should come to these simple folks, these Sunday School watercolor figures, who are so purely themselves, while we now are complex and full at heart. We are busy. So, I see now, were they. Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? There is no one but us. There is no one to send nor a pure heart on the face of the earth, but only us, a generation comforting ourselves with the notion that we have come at an awkward time. But there is no one but us. There never has been. There are generations which remembered, and generations which forgot; there has never been a generation of whole men and women who lived well for even one day."

If we stand looking up to heaven, I think we miss the point. If we are looking to Jesus as an escape route on really rough days, a sort of biblical "Calgon, take me away!" we also miss the point. If we rely on a single political figure to be our salvation (or our retribution), we really miss the point.

Yesterday, several of us walked up to Fountain Park to be part of a community give-back event commemorating the anniversary of last year's tornado. In a neighborhood that was devastated last May, all manner of neighbors and agencies had gathered between bouts of rain to offer food and services and fellowship and fun. There was even a very large octopus walking down the street.

The wreckage of Centennial Church, destroyed by the tornado, has been cleared, and that vacant lot awaits new life and new growth. The fountain has been restored and is flowing again, and storm-damaged statue of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is back on its pedestal. It was joyful and humbling, to see this splendid example of a community at its best – reaching out in gratitude to others.

Should FEMA and the City of St. Louis and insurance companies have been better actors, both before and after the storm? Absolutely. Does such irresponsibility outrage us? Of course it does. But outrage is a dangerous neighborhood in which to live. The practice of

owning the other side with sound bites and memes can be fun for a while but doesn't seem to accomplish much in the end. If not outrage, then what?

I think it is essential to believe that we are *Theophili*, friends of God. I think it is also crucial to believe in *theosis*, that the ascended Christ has taken our collective humanity into the very heart of God. If so, we know that we are not called to stand staring into the sky, or to rely on Calgon, or to be dependent on a Great Leader.

Instead, in the face of every sinful injustice that presses around us – poverty, a housing crisis, gun violence, care of the planet, transphobia, Christian Nationalism (the list is too long), we, as Christians, are called to be witnesses by seeking to serve Christ in our neighbors and our neighborhood because we believe that, in Christ, God has shown us that there is room for all of us in God forever.

On this day, in this place, we are witnesses of the things that God dreams for us in Christ who is filling all things, who will judge all things, and who will heal all things. As you ponder how you might live your life differently as a friend of God, how you might witness to God's work in the world, I invite you to bathe in some words of Malcom Guite.

Ascension

We saw his light break through the cloud of glory
Whilst we were rooted still in time and place
As earth became a part of Heaven's story
And heaven opened to his human face.
We saw him go and yet we were not parted
He took us with him to the heart of things
The heart that broke for all the broken-hearted
Is whole and Heaven-centred now, and sings,
Sings in the strength that rises out of weakness,
Sings through the clouds that veil him from our sight,
Whilst we our selves become his clouds of witness
And sing the waning darkness into light,
His light in us, and ours in him concealed,
Which all creation waits to see revealed.

Alleluia. Christ is risen.
The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!