

The Church in Action sermon series
The Ascension - Acts 1:1-11
June 7, 2026
Rev. Dr. Kory Wilcoxson

The Bible can be a pretty daunting book to read. It's really long, it usually has tiny type, and, depending on which translation you read, it can have a lot of "thees" and "thous" and "He wenteth to the well to draweth water and then begat forty-five sons and here are all their names." The first time I tried reading the Bible, I started with Genesis and made it about nine chapters before I decided to find something better to do.

But the Bible isn't really a book; it's a collection of books, a library of writings collected over thousands of years. When someone asks me where to start reading the Bible, I always tell them to start with a gospel, usually Luke. The gospels are fairly fast-paced, have a compelling narrative, and most people are familiar with the main character. That's Jesus, in case you were wondering.

But, honestly, the most action-packed book in the Bible is the book of Acts. You've got jailbreaks and shipwrecks, supernatural healings and powerful speeches, and even people apparating from one place to another – I think that was put in there for Harry Potter fans. Acts is the only history book in the New Testament, tucked in between the four biographies of Jesus we know as the Gospels and a bunch of mail, the letters Paul wrote to churches and people. And then there's Revelation, but we don't talk about Revelation.

For our summer sermon series, we're going to take a trip through Acts. The book was written by Luke as a sequel to his gospel. Those two books are meant to be read back-to-back. The gospel tells the story of Jesus's ministry on earth, and Acts tells how we get from a rag-tag group of scared disciples to a powerful evangelistic movement that swept the known world despite existential threats from both Jews and Romans. What can we learn from these flawed, faithful folks about being the church in a broken world that is apathetic to the faith?

Well, we're going to find out, but first we have a very important task to attend to. And I mean this in the most respectful way possible...we have to get rid of Jesus. At the end of Luke's gospel, Jesus has been arrested, tried, crucified, and then – plot twist! – has risen from the dead, making several resurrection appearances. He's given the disciples their marching orders: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." So now...he's gotta get out of the way so they can get to work.

The event of Jesus' leaving is actually a major holiday in the church known as Ascension Day. I thought Ascension Day was primarily a Catholic celebration, but I was talking to someone who attends a Catholic church about this, and she said, "What's an Ascension?" Culturally, this story doesn't have the commercial appeal of Christmas or the resurrection joy of Easter, but in the grand scheme of God's work in this world, it is just as important.

I think I know why we don't really celebrate the Ascension. It's because what is acknowledged on Ascension Day is the fact that Jesus left us; it's the day the present Lord became absent. Who wants to celebrate being left behind? Do we really need a day commemorating Christ's absence from us? We get too many reminders of that on regular days, divorce days, diagnosis days, death-by-a-thousand-paper-cuts days, constant reminders that God doesn't always feel as close to us as we would like. We want him around, popping up here and there when we need him. We know all too well what it feels like when Jesus is absent from us.

The ascension reminds us he's gone, he's no longer with us, and that's not something to celebrate.

But we need Jesus to leave. Why? What Acts does, particularly these first verses, is it completes Jesus' story and fulfills God's promises. It reminds us that what God begins, God completes. What God promises, God fulfills. This episode brings closure to the story of the Incarnation, the Word made flesh, and prepares the way for the fulfilling of the next promise. Jesus says in John's gospel, "If you love me you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another counselor to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth." That's what happens on Pentecost, which we'll talk about next week.

But we're not there yet. We only have to wait a week, but the disciples had to wait 40 days. Forty days in between Jesus going up and the Holy Spirit coming down. If you've ever had to wait for something that's important, you know that's a loooong time. No wonder they stood there looking up at the sky! I would, too. In a sense, ever since the Ascension we've been looking up, waiting for a glimpse of God, waiting for Jesus to return and set things right. We're living in what theologian Karl Barth called "the significant pause," the time in between Jesus' first and second coming, the time where we wait with expectant hope for God to do what God has promised. And until then, we stand with the disciples, looking up and wondering and asking, "Now what?"

Now what, indeed. I've heard that question asked many times. Now what? The person I thought would always be around is no longer around. Now what? That security I thought I would always have is gone. Now what? The child I thought would always need me is off on their own. Now what? Sometimes the assurance of Jesus' presence slips from our hands like a child's balloon that floats to the heavens. And we're left behind to ask, "Now what?"

God heard the disciples' hearts crying out that question, because God provides an answer in the form of two angels who offer a gentle reproof: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky?" In other words, "Don't just stand there; do something!" Jesus spent three years doing ministry among these disciples, teaching them and listening to them and forgiving them and empowering them. He has been preparing them for this moment, when the reins of this fledgling religious group would be handed over to them. It's time to stop looking up and start looking around. As I heard one pastor say it, "Don't look for Jesus in the heights; look for him in the depths." The depths of human life, the deep, dark places in the world, that's where the disciples will now find him.

So, as we sit here this morning, I wonder if we are guilty of the same neck-craning as the disciples. Are we sitting here looking up, waiting for a concrete sign from the heavens, putting God's work on hold until we get some sort of confirmation that Jesus hasn't abandoned us? Are we hoping to experience a presence that would make sense of the feelings of absence, a definitive, incontrovertible truth to counteract the absurdity of life? Are we holding back until we know that we know that we know this whole faith thing is true?

If we are, that's OK. I believe all of us go through times when that's all we have to offer, simply to be here with our craned necks and our quizzical looks. That's the challenge of having faith. The reality of life is that there will be times when Christ feels absent, when we live in the "significant pause" between Christ's appearances in our lives. But if we only spend our time looking up, I think we've lost the plot. Unlike the disciples, we don't have the benefit of three years of teaching from Jesus, but we have something else to prove he is real. We have this church. We have God's word. We have the bread and the cup. We have each other. This place is our training ground, where we can hear about and practice grace and forgiveness and loving each

other, even the ones we don't like, so that we can take those things into the world. But if the extent of our faith – our scripture reading, our praying, our talking about justice and inclusion and being Christ-like – if all of that starts and ends here, we're just looking up.

As I was researching this sermon, I came across a Renaissance painting of the Ascension. In it, Jesus is about three stories up making that familiar hand sign and the disciples are all staring up at him. And I saw the most peculiar thing in this painting. On the ground, where Jesus was just standing moments before, are a set of footprints, a reminder that Jesus was just here, that his body was real, that it took up space on this earth. Jesus left footprints here.

I believe we are called to come here and look up in prayer so that we can go out there and look around as...well, I was going to say as witnesses, but I learned a new word this week from another pastor. She called us followers of Jesus "witnesses." Not only do we testify to the power of the risen Christ, but we embody it to be with the people who need it most. To me, that's what we are called to be, to be "witnesses," to be the footprints of Jesus, the tangible sign of his existence in this world. We come here each week to listen and to sing and to taste, to be reminded of who we are and who we're called to be so we can go out and live that call. We come here to pray so we can go out there and witness. There's nothing wrong with looking up, with seeking God's face and waiting with hope. But if we only look up, if we don't then live out what we believe is true, we're missing the presence of Christ that's already here, in our midst.

The answer to "now what" – in our faith and in our culture – is the church, reaching out to comfort the afflicted, to be a companion to the lonely, to confront evil, to speak a word of truth, to leave footprints in his name. Pastor Barbara Brown Taylor says about this story, "It's almost as if Jesus had not ascended but exploded, so that all of the holiness that was once concentrated in him alone flew everywhere, so that the seeds of heaven were sown over the fields of the earth." The Ascension isn't a story about Christ's absence. It's a story about Christ's presence with us in all times and all places, including right here, right now. But he's not just here, he's out there, in the depths. Let's go see if we can find him. And where we don't find him, let's be him, Christ's "witnesses" in this world that is tangibly feeling his absence. We have been given the power to do Christ's work in this world. Now what?