

St. Paul's Anglican Church
Ascension Day
May 30, 2019

Rev. Mr. Thomas Houghton

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be always acceptable in thy sight, oh Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Please be seated.

We have St. Luke, the author of the gospel in his name, and of his second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, to thank for our understanding of the Ascension. In fact, St. Matthew doesn't describe the ascension at all, nor does St. John! St. Mark is brief, as is his customary style, and only notes that Jesus, after speaking to the apostles, was "received up into heaven and sat on the right hand of God."

Even Luke in his gospel is quite brief, and this was our gospel reading for today. But in the Acts of the Apostles, which we read for the Epistle today, he is more expansive. Let me pause to mention an irony here today. When Fr. Tom and Fr. Dennis and I were discussing who would do what today, Fr. Tom pointed out that with two equal clergy, Dennis and I being equal as deacons, the one giving the sermon would normally read the gospel. Yet here I read the epistle and am preaching. The irony is that the more profound message for Ascension Day is in fact in the Epistle.

At any rate, in earliest times, the church celebrated the whole fifty days between Easter and Pentecost as a single festival celebrating the passion, resurrection, ascension, and the coming of the Holy Spirit. Only in the fourth century did the idea develop of separating the several events of our Lord's redemptive act into distinct festivals.

St. Luke tells us in the Acts of the Apostles that forty days elapsed between our Lord's resurrection and ascension. Ascension Day therefore always falls on a Thursday (in old English usage, it was called Holy Thursday) and this tends to obscure the fact that it is

one of the major feasts of the Christian year. As such, it is provided with its own Proper Preface (which you will hear in a few minutes in the Holy Communion, right before the Sanctus).

This proper preface refers to the apostles and says that it was “in their sight” that Christ ascended up into heaven. This is often contrasted with the words in the collect for today that “we do believe” He ascended. We believe with faith, not sight. But the apostles’ sight was not without faith. Nor is our *not* having seen, any hindrance to our enjoying the full benefits of Christ’s ascension.

If you listened closely to the epistle and gospel, both written by St. Luke, and I know you did, you might have noticed a seeming disparity. In the gospel, he appears to place the Ascension on the day of the resurrection itself; in the epistle, it occurs after forty days. This apparent discrepancy can be easily explained. The epistle is an expounding, an elaboration, on what had occurred: This elaboration of events of course included the commandments he gave to the apostles, the demand that they meet him in Galilee, the “many infallible proofs” he had given by which he showed himself alive after his passion. These infallible proofs included allowing them to touch his wounds, his eating fish and honeycomb with them, his walk to Emmaus and meal there, and his cooking fish for the disciples who had failed to catch any fish all night, until he told them where to cast their nets. It makes sense that all this took days, in fact, forty days.

But note that the disciples still couldn’t give up the idea of a return of the glories of the kingdom of Israel. They perhaps were thinking of their own glory that Jesus had promised them. Yet he rebukes them saying: “it is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father has put into his own power.” Jesus is also telling us, we are promised life everlasting, but it is not ours to know the day and the hour. Rather it is best for us to be ready every day and every hour.

Then he did promise them that they would receive power (not earthly honors) but heavenly powers when the Holy Ghost is come upon you. And echoing the great commission which is written in Mathew 28, Jesus says that the apostles will be witnesses unto him in first Jerusalem, then in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the earth.

Having said all these things, Luke states that he was taken up, and a cloud received him out of their sight. And as they were staring up, two men in white (that is bible speak for angels, right?) asked, you men of Galilee, why stand you gazing up into heaven? The angels said, this same Jesus, which is taken up into heaven, shall so come again *in like manner* as you have seen him go up into heaven.

What's all that about? It suggests that this is the glorified Christ who shall return in Glory to judge both the quick and the dead. Theologically, ascension means: first, our eternal fellowship with God, through his Manhood transfigured and transformed which Christ as taken into heaven, second, the immediate access we have to God through the Holy Spirit which Christ has sent to us on Pentecost, and third, by the priestly intercession which He makes for us at his Father's side.

Let us pray the collect for today (you can read along on page 177 of the BCP):

Grant, we beseech thee, Almighty God, that like we do believe thy only begotten son, our Lord Jesus Christ to have ascended into the heavens; so we may also in heart and mind thither ascend, and with him continually dwell, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, one God, world without end. Amen.

Now unto God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost, be ascribed all might, majesty, power, dominion, and glory, both now and evermore. Amen.

He that soweth little shall reap little; and he that soweth plenteously shall reap plenteously. Let every man do according as

he is disposed in his heart, not grudgingly, or of necessity; for God loveth a cheerful giver.