

Lk 24:44-Acts 1:11 – “Cleared To Position and Hold”

It's been another interesting week, with some exciting new challenges arising from discovering and enrolling in a program of Intercultural Studies at UBC. I'll be spending a significant chunk of this coming week in class, but the good news is that doing so will immeasurably speed up the extra work I need to do on my ThM thesis.

Another exciting time came on Friday, as I discovered I could track on my computer the flight that my daughter Sharon and son Davie were taking home from Los Angeles. On a website (www.flightstats.com) you can track in real time the progress of an airplane's flight – location, altitude, track – and overlays on a map, just like you get on one of the onboard channels of many airlines. I even knew why they were holding on a taxiway for a long time after they left the gate (enroute scheduling delays because of thunderstorms). Once they took off, I could follow their climb through 9,000 feet on up to their cruising altitude of 32,000 feet.

Some of you know that I have my pilots license, and others of you have been bored to tears by my stories of flying my own planes. I've stopped flying, because out here it's no fun – takes too long to get to an airport, and it's such a busy area that there's not a lot of freedom. But there have been tons of great moments, and there are countless great memories.

Of all the moments of flying, though, I think the most exciting for me was that moment before smoothly shoving the throttles forward and rolling down the runway. At that moment, it all comes together: the years of learning and studying and training and practice; the hours of flight planning, poring over maps, checking the weather, filing the flight plan; the preflight, checking all of the familiar bits and pieces of the plane as if doing so could save your life (and knowing and believing that it does!). Then the startup, listening to the familiar sounds with a keen ear and watching the gauges with a hawk's eye, intent on catching any hint that something is not quite right, twiddling the dials and setting the controls to that 'just right' position. Finally through the headphones comes that happy clearance to start moving, to wend what seems a confusing pattern through the taxiways. Sometimes the clearance to take off gets delayed, usually because a much, much heavier airplane like a 747 has just departed leaving turbulence behind that will flip a small plane like mine like leaves by a leafblower.

Those are the times the familiar voice of the tower controller would come over the earphones with, "... taxi to position and hold, runway two-seven", the formal equivalent of "stand by for takeoff". Sitting on the runway, watching the previous departure rise out of sight, confident in my checklists and procedures, anticipating the 'right wind', excited at what lies just ahead. A little bit tense, also, ready for quick responses to unforeseen happenings, but also feeling the thrill of accomplishing the tasks with competence, and conducting it all in a way that earned acceptance from the 'pros'.

You may by now be wondering, "what on earth does this have to do with the gospel?" For me, everything. The connection between this passage from Luke-Acts with flying was for me instantaneous, for both flying and the passage evoke, for me at least, the same kind of incredible excitement. Look at it with me, and see if I can somehow convey that sense of excitement, of tense but joyful anticipation.

To begin, you may recall that the Gospel according to Luke, and the Acts of the Apostles, are pretty much universally recognized as being two halves of one book written by the same person. You might then ask, why are they separate? The most reasonable

explanation for the division into two units is that the Gospel of Luke fits exactly into one scroll. Documents in those days were written onto long pieces of parchment, or vellum, and rolled up for handling, unlike today's version of binding lots of pieces of paper together to make a book. Technological and manufacturing issues put a constraint on the maximum size of a scroll that could be produced, or used, and that length matches the length of Luke's gospel. It's unfortunate in many ways that when the books of the bible first coalesced into their present order (the gospels in what was thought to be the order of writing, then the epistles in descending order of length, finally Revelations with its emphasis on end times) that John's gospel separates these two halves. I say that because when you recognize the 'one-ness' of Luke-Acts, then our text today becomes the pivotal point of the whole. Instead of leaving Luke's gospel taper off with the disciples "continually in the temple blessing God", or Acts revving up the tempo with a quick review, meshing them back together helps us to understand that this could qualify as perhaps the most exciting moment in the Christian faith. That's why today we read them together as one continuous reading, because this is the turning point in Luke's gospel, this is that exciting pause when the church was told, "taxi to position and hold".

Throughout Luke's gospel we see God active in the redemption of humanity through the announcement, the birth, the baptism, the ministry, the death and the resurrection of Jesus. Luke takes great pains to convey that God's action in Christ is a continuation of His previous activity in the world, and the fulfillment of the promises He had made to His people, recorded in the Scriptures. Moreover that this saving and redeeming action was not confined to Jerusalem, or even to the Jews. Luke understands and presents the events of the Israelites – the testing in the wilderness on the flight from Egypt; exhaustive training under the Judges, Samuel, Saul, David, Solomon, the priests and rabbis; the preparation and planning under the prophets – all these as preliminaries, as finally coming to a focal point in the ministry, the death and the resurrection of Jesus.

Luke contends that in the journey of faith, the warm-up and taxiing is complete, but the real flight is just about to begin. The tension is palpable, the excitement intense, as Jesus tells his disciples to "stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high". It sounds so mundane in those few words, but it truly is a moment of indescribable excitement, tension and import, right up there with the best of life-changing events: about to get the results from a pregnancy test; your first bungee jump; receiving that letter from a university that might be your acceptance; the phone ringing with a call from the doctor with good news about the biopsy. For me the best analogy is waiting for takeoff in a small plane – as some pilots say, it's the most exhilarating thing you can do that's also legal! That's the kind of excited tension you need to hear from this reading. The joyful anticipation as the disciples are "cleared to position and hold", watching Jesus, risen from death as the Christ, now ascending majestically into heaven.

And the result when the disciples get their clearance to takeoff? As we follow Luke on into the Acts of the Apostles over the next few weeks, we see that their takeoff was every bit as exciting as a launch from an aircraft carrier. With a rush of wind, tongues of fire like from an afterburner, they are propelled to carry the good news of God's saving grace in Christ Jesus from Jerusalem, through Judea and Samaria to the ends of the earth. From this pivotal and exhilarating moment the disciples take off to carry the banner of the gospel, fanning out after takeoff in all directions, carrying a full load of good news to all the world. What an exciting, exhilarating, enlivening moment!

No wonder the disciples spent those last minutes on standby for takeoff “with great joy, continually in the temple blessing God.”

How about you? I know my aviation experiences probably don’t evoke the same kind of excitement for you that they do for me, but I would guess you’ve had similar experiences. I’m sure you’ve experienced the same kind of intense nervous anticipation as you waited for something really good to finally happen, and can relate your experience to how the gospel story here is about to burst forth with a glorious explosion of great happenings in God’s kingdom.

One of the neat things about that moment of excited anticipation is that it never disappeared, no matter how many flights. And I’m thinking the same is true here at Central. Each time we hear this clearance “to position and hold” from scripture, there’s the same sense of something exciting about to happen just ahead in our faith. Will we have to chop the throttles and abandon the takeoff run? I don’t think so; all the gauges are “in the green”. Will we “crash and burn” shortly after takeoff? I don’t anticipate any such problem; mechanically everything checks out OK, and we’ve certainly got the right kind of fuel – high-octane Word of God! Will we reach our destination? With certainty, confident in our faith in God and Christ, and sped onward by the tailwind of the Holy Spirit, we can rest easy that we will safely and softly touch down in God’s heavenly kingdom, and be welcomed warmly on arrival.

Our route? Well, that’s the part that’s still a bit unclear. We may have some scenic detours; we probably will run into some mild turbulence from time to time; like any flight we will have our ups and downs, climbing over obstacles and coasting back down when all clear; we may even encounter the occasional holding pattern, where we circle for a while until it becomes clear which specific route we are to follow. Sometimes we will be in bright sunshine, giving praise to God for the beauty of all that we see; other times we will be in the clouds, pleading to God for safety and assurance and hanging on together with white knuckles. We will probably be in darkness for part of our trip together, with no clear navigation points visible, but with God acting as a heavenly Air Traffic Controller guiding us calmly and surely.

That moment when the disciples were given their clearance “to position and hold”, to standby for takeoff, by Jesus was truly a pivotal moment in our faith, as the focus shifted dramatically from participating in the ministry of Jesus to spreading the gospel, the Good News of God’s redeeming action in Christ. Luke presents it that way, as the point upon which not only his account balances, but as the central point in the greatest story of the world. My flying analogies may leave you flat on the ground, or even airsick, but for me it’s the closest I can come to describing the powerful, excited anticipation of that moment. Hopefully you can sense and capture that excitement, and together we can hear and see ourselves – just as the disciples were in Jerusalem – cleared “to position and hold”, ready for a great flight of faith!