

“Why Are You Just Standing There?” – Acts 1:1-11 – Ascension Sunday – May 16, 2010

Ah, where to begin? At the beginning, apparently. As we move through the church year from Easter to Pentecost readings from the Book of Acts provide insight into the faithful during the very early days of the church. There is a lot that happens in those fifty days, but today, Ascension Sunday, we will start at the very beginning of the Book of Acts.

Even so, where to begin with this short reading? There is such a lot happening in these few verses that it is a bit of a challenge deciding which item should provide the opening. Let's just take it “from the top” so to speak and start with the opening words. “In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did ...” Wait a minute – what first book? You mean this isn't the beginning after all? And who's this Theophilus character?

We need to answer these questions, as trivial as they might seem, because in answering them we begin to understand the author of Acts and we begin to see why the author thought it was important that we should know about the events in today's reading. To answer the first question first, the “first book” referred to here is the Gospel according to Luke. Whether the author's name really was Luke we can't be certain ... that name was assigned by tradition, and there is no documented evidence one way or the other. However, it is pretty clear that the person who wrote the Gospel according to Luke also wrote the book of Acts. Everybody has a unique writing style – vocabulary, grammatical style, even themes and emphases serve to mark a piece of writing as being from a particular author, and these elements are consistent across the two books. The overall theme of the two books becomes clear when they are treated as a unit, and you can think of Luke's approach as describing the effect of God's acting in history through Jesus Christ as being like a stone dropped into calm water, with ripples moving out from Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. He's even pretty open about that theme because he states it explicitly here in verse 8.

But if there is one consistent theme, the question arises, “why two books?” The answer lies in technology – in the writing technology of the day. New Testament Gospels – and Acts – were written on vellum scrolls, with two rollers. You could roll from one part to another much like a microfilm reel or even a VCR tape. The maximum length of a scroll was about forty feet – any bigger and it got too heavy to hold, and wouldn't fit in the standard racks. Well, in the original writing in Greek, each of the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts take up a full forty-foot scroll. The separation into two “books” is the breakpoint between two scrolls.

The second question, as to just who is this Theophilus, is also revealing. In the English translations that word has a capital letter and thus sure looks like a proper name, like Jim or Elizabeth. However, in the original Greek the word is not capitalized – they didn't use capitals – and is a real word – “theo philus” – which means, “friend of God.” So, this work, the Book of Acts, is not being written to educate some individual with a Greek-sounding name, but is addressed to “one who loves God.” You may be rolling your eyeballs by now wondering why on earth I'm even mentioning this – but this helps us understand that this sacred writing is not targeted at converting the unbelieving, but is presented to fulfill the thirst for knowledge of one who is already a lover of God. That realization helps us better understand the implications of what is being said as we read this book.

In this opening Luke gives us a summary of the first scroll or book, that it told about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven. He also addresses here the huge question that's left hanging at the end of the first scroll, with Jesus being taken up into heaven – the event we celebrate today as the Ascension of Christ. That huge question that is left hanging: “What happens now?” Or perhaps we can phrase it, “How can the apostles even hope to carry on now that Jesus is gone?”

The Ascension of Jesus is problematic. We in the church tend to focus on the life, the death and the resurrection of Jesus, but apart from the line in the Apostle's creed – "he ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of the Father" – we don't pay much attention to his Ascension. Some of that lack of attention to this event showed up recently with the commotion over the "discovery" of what are claimed to be the bones of Jesus – and his family – near Jerusalem. I once heard one of the Rev. Dr.'s in our Presbytery state in a sermon that if this discovery were real it would pose a challenge to the Resurrection. Unnnhhh, no, not really. You see, if the discovery of the bones should ever prove to be real, that would support that Jesus lived, and wouldn't challenge the Resurrection at all, but it would seriously challenge the claim that Jesus ascended directly into heaven.

However, the 'discovery' of those bones was more of a publicity stunt to launch a movie and book than it was serious archeology, and so we can continue to hear Luke's account of this event with confidence. And once again it is the little detail that provides the human reality of this story, in particular the detail at the end when the two men in white robes asked the disciples, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" How many times have you stood watching an airplane that is carrying a relative or friend, a loved one, fly out of sight? A while ago as I was returning from the Richmond Hospital I stopped for lunch at the McDonald's that's near the end of the departure runway at YVR (near the Olympic skating oval), and I watched a WestJet 737-800 roll down the runway, lift off, and head for who knows where. I thought it was a domestic flight and kept waiting for it to turn to the left to circle back eastbound, but that never happened, and so I watched it and watched it and watched it until I could no longer make out the tiny white dot – I guess it was going to Hawaii. I'm sure you've done the same, whether it was an airplane, or a ship disappearing over the horizon, or a car driving away into the distance on the prairie. We stand and watch, and watch, and watch, because breaking off the watching acknowledges that they are finally gone and we may never see them again.

And that's how the disciples were stuck – standing watching and watching and watching, unable or unwilling to acknowledge that that part of the faith journey was over. How often does that happen to Christians today? How often do today's "friends of God" get stuck looking back at the "glory" days of the first exciting encounter with Christ, unable or unwilling to acknowledge that it is time to move on, to stop staring back and wishing it could be the way it used to be? Sadly, too often. Too often we get stuck standing there looking at the vanished dot of what used to be, frozen in inaction, not daring to accept that things have changed and that a new response, new actions, new tasks and challenges lie before us, just like the disciples that day in Jerusalem as Jesus ascended into heaven.

But that wasn't the end of the story, it was only the intermission between Scroll 1 and Scroll 2. The two men in white robes (wonder if they were the same two who were at the empty tomb?) jolted the disciples out of their skyward-gazing reverie. With their rhetorical question, "why are you just standing there with your mouth open staring at nothing?" they reminded the disciples not only that Jesus was coming back but also that he had given them a job to do in the meantime. "You will be my martyrs – witnesses – in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." That's a big job, indeed! That's a tough, challenging, life-long job to which they have been called, but Jesus also promised them that the Holy Spirit would come upon them, giving them the strength to accomplish this big job, giving them the guidance and wisdom to lead them through all the confusions and challenges they would face. So, the disciples had their marching orders, had the promise of Holy help to accomplish all that they had been called to do, and yet there they were standing like tourists staring with rapt faces up into the sky. No wonder they were given an angelic shove to stop looking up, to stop looking back, and to start getting on with the tasks at hand in the Kingdom.

It is good for us to be reminded of this story. Whenever we find ourselves gazing into the sky, just like the apostles wistfully longing for Jesus to right there by our side, it is good to get an angelic nudge to remind us once again that until Jesus returns riding on the clouds there is work to be done right here on earth. The list is long – feeding the hungry, comforting the lonely, visiting the sick and the imprisoned, proclaiming the Good News of God’s redeeming love in Christ Jesus. I once saw a bumper sticker on a car that in a way speaks to this – “Jesus is coming: look busy!”

“How can we do all of this with Jesus gone from us?” is surely one of the questions running through the minds of the apostles as they stared longingly up into the sky. The answer to that question will of course be heard next week as we celebrate the gift of the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, at Pentecost. But for now, the reminder that it is time to stop staring at the sky and to get on with the work of the Kingdom is timely and appropriate, and reassuring.

So, our reading from Acts is an interesting beginning. It’s not a start from zero, but a restart, a redirection, a re-energizing and re-commissioning of his disciples by Jesus, the risen Christ. Perhaps we – disciples of Jesus and “friends of God” – can also hear it as a reboot, a restart, a redirection, a re-energizing and re-commissioning, and a moving forward in faith. May God continue to bless us as we turn our gaze from the sky to the world in which we witness.