

“A New Phase” – Acts 1:1-11 – Ascension Sunday – May 12, 2013

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 back 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 do, 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. It helps to 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 a reel-to-reel tape recorder. The maximum length of a scroll was about forty feet – any longer and it was 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 our English bible 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 literally 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 instead 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 an unbeliever, but is presented to fulfill the thirst for knowledge of one who is already a lover of God. That insight 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 answers to those questions are given by this second book and these opening introductory verses not only set the theme and direction of those answers but also forever link what has gone on before with the new phase of faith. The reminder “all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning” brings into the mind of the lover of God all the wondrous things that Jesus said and did, and reminds the faithful reader of how the power of God was so clearly evident in Jesus. The reader is also reminded of what Jesus had to say just before he departed from the disciples, ascending into heaven until the clouds hid him from sight. These final words of Jesus not only provided the promise of an ongoing link between all that had happened and what was to come, but also gave his followers an outline of what this new phase of faith would look like and how it would unfold.

Those words: “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” The promise of the Holy Spirit was the ongoing link connecting the God-inspired teachings and God-powered miracles of Jesus’ earthly ministry and the God-inspired and God-powered actions of the faithful followers of Christ throughout the ages to come. The Holy Spirit is the ever-present ongoing link that keeps Christ close to us, and empowers us as we in our turn become faithful followers also.

It is the second part of those departing words from Jesus that define how it will be – and still is – that we will exercise the power given to us through the Holy Spirit. “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” This junction between the two books presents the defining moment where the ministry of Jesus continues in his followers, and blossoms and branches out and spreads to the whole earth.

But that’s also where the disciples got stuck – standing watching and watching and watching, unable or unwilling to acknowledge that that part of the faith journey was over and not yet fully aware that a totally new phase had already begun. 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 (I 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 indeed 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 this message of a new phase in faith as a reboot, a restart, a redirection, a re-energizing and re-commissioning, and a moving forward in faith. What will our own "book of acts" look like as we continue to move forward in our own new phase of faith? Only God knows for sure, but with the help and guidance of the Holy Spirit we will have a wondrous time as it unfolds for us.