

“Season Opener” – Luke 24:34-44/Acts 1:1-11 – Ascension Sunday – May 17, 2015

Well, it's that time of year again ... that point in the orbiting of the planet Earth around the Sun at which TV series end, with only reruns to sustain us until the Fall. I don't watch many series but I do avidly follow NCIS, the criminal investigation show. And as usual, this year the season ends with a dramatic note and a dangling “to be continued...” As is also usual, when the series begins anew in the Fall the first episode will have a header, “Formerly on N.C.I.S...” with a short recap of what happened in the last episode of the Spring. You may have recognized something similar in our Luke-Acts reading this morning. We started that reading near the end of the Gospel of Luke and continued into the Book of Acts. You may have found that a bit curious, but stick with me ... there's a good reason why I asked Gerald to read these two segments together as one.

The opening words of the Book of Acts give us an initial clue: “In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did ...” 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, another 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 twelve metres (forty feet if you prefer) – 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 takes up a full forty-foot scroll. The separation into two “books” is the breakpoint between two scrolls.

The second question, 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 capital letters in writings – 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 crucial realization helps us better understand the implications of what is being said as we read this book.

So, what other useful insights can we gain from recognizing that these two books are linked? As I said at the beginning, it is important to, and the author Luke meant for us to, view the two books as one unit, one story. As I also said, the pairing is a lot like the season ender and season opener of a popular TV series, say for example NCIS. The season ender program finishes with unresolved questions and a message, “to be continued ...” and the season opener always includes a quick review, “in our last episode ...” The same is true here ... we are left ‘hanging’ at the end of Luke’s gospel; oh sure, they’re all “continually in the temple blessing God”, but we’re left dangling with a sense of something else coming with Jesus’ statement, “stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” The Book of Acts then opens with a recap of the gospel and a replay of the Ascension event and this time not only is the promise of power to come more fully described but also there is an indication from the angels of what’s to follow.

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 a few years ago with a flap 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 necessarily 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 both the human reality of this story and an important message. I refer to 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?” Theirs is not an uncommon reaction – repeated for example by someone watching an airplane carrying a relative or friend, a loved one, fly out of sight? You may well have done that, 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. Until the two angels appeared to disrupt them the disciples were similarly stuck – standing watching and watching and watching, unable or unwilling to acknowledge that that part of the faith journey was over.

But there’s a problem: how often is that still the reaction of 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 things have changed, that it is time to move on, time to stop staring back and wishing it could be the way it used to be? Sadly, far 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.

Recognizing that these two books are linked together helps us realize that Jesus’ ascension into the skies wasn’t the end of the story. We begin to understand anew that it was instead a very pivotal – and uplifting – event and the beginning of a whole new chapter (well, book, really!) in the story of our Christian faith, the story of God’s redeeming action in Jesus

Christ lived out by the faithful. After the intermission following the season ender, in the new season opener we have the two men in white robes (wonder if they were the same two who were at the empty tomb?) jolting 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”, Jesus had told them. 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 be 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. You know one of my favourite bumper stickers 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 season opener, a restart, a redirection, a re-energizing and re-commissioning of his disciples by Jesus, the risen Christ. Hopefully 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 live and witness.