



FAITH ALWAYS LEANS FORWARD

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Acts 1: 1-14

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The first time I ever heard of, much less participated in, an Ascension Day service was the year I lived in England. I was studying at a theological college in Cambridge and the High Anglican Theological College folks invited me to participate in their Ascension Day service. I was given a heavy wooden pole to carry that held a large candle on a hot, muggy Thursday afternoon. Wearing my first-ever white alb, or cassock, I processed amid swirls of incense into the chapel. Someone snapped a photograph of me that still makes me chuckle. I am standing outside in the afternoon sun and there is an optical illusion that makes my white alb seem absolutely luminous. Taken from a low angle looking up, this photo makes me look as if *I* am about to take off and ascend into heaven!

While Presbyterians and other mainline churches do not make much (or anything, really) of The Ascension of the Lord Day, in over a dozen countries it is a public holiday. It occurs on the Thursday 40 days after Easter. Banks and post offices are closed. In Sweden, some Christians go out into the woods at 3 or 4 a.m. to hear the birds sing at sunrise. If the cuckoo sings from the direction of east or west, it is considered good luck. And Ascension Day also marks the opening day of fishing season as the fish ‘wake up’ this day after the long winter’s rest. In Germany, Ascension Day is also known as Father’s Day or Men’s Day. There, groups of male friends or relatives spend the day together in outdoor activities like hiking, then share a communal meal. In other places there are processions with prayers and songs and candles, blessing individual lots and fields, or blessing fruits and vegetables in church. For Catholics, Ascension Day is considered a Holy Day of Obligation where attending mass is required.



All of this, but only one of the Gospel writers even tells of Jesus' ascension into heaven. The author of the Gospel of Luke is also the author of the Book of Acts and he alone tells the story of the ascension. It is important enough that Luke tells the story twice—in the last 4 verses of the Gospel and in these opening verses of Acts. Remarkably, this barely-mentioned event became important enough for the early church to include in both the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds...“he ascended into heaven,” each one declares.

In the New Testament, the Book of Acts is located after the four Gospels and before the letters written by Paul and others to churches. Acts, then, functions as a kind of “hinge” between the stories of Jesus' life and the early accounting of the church's life. Jesus' ascension into heaven becomes the hinge event between what one scholar calls the “Period of Jesus” and the “Period of the Church.” The first verses of Acts recall that after his resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples and hung around for 40 days speaking with them about the kingdom of God. Then Jesus tells them to wait in Jerusalem to receive the power of the Holy Spirit. Afterward, they are to become his witnesses to the ends of the earth. Then Jesus ascends into heaven and his disciples watch him go up, his feet disappearing into the clouds, while they are left standing with their feet planted firmly in the dust of the earth.

I always think this a poignant story. Here, the disciples have to ‘let go’ of Jesus' earthly, bodily presence and learn to live with and for him in a different “ends-of-the-earth” kind of way. It is understandable that they did not want to take their eyes off of him. In verses 9-11 there are no less than four references to watching, sight, gazing, and staring. They must have wondered how on earth to go on without him.

This summer will mark three years ago that my mother died unexpectedly following surgery. She hung on precariously for a week until it became apparent she could not live. We sat beside her as she died, watching over her, knowing we could not hold her here despite our own wish to do so. When I left the hospital for the last time, I felt that I was walking out into a strange new world...a world



without my mother in it. My sister and I went somewhere for dinner not because we were hungry but because we didn't want to be alone. Then I returned to Mom's house where I had been staying. I walked through the door that night where everything was the same and yet nothing was the same...and nothing would ever be the same again. I sat down and an anguished cry welled up and out as I realized I had moved from one Period of my life into another.

Biblical scholar, Willie James Jennings, writes about Jesus' disciples in this particular moment following his ascension: "This is a moment of loss, even as they know they must go forward in faith. We must never discount the next step that must be taken at the sight of Jesus' leaving. Such a step is understandably a labored step, unsure and unclear. Nevertheless it must be taken," Jennings writes, "because faith always leans forward...toward the place where God waits to meet us. We are always drawn on by God to our future. The Holy Spirit," he says, "always waits for us to enter the journey of newness."ⁱ

Think of one of those "hinge" moments in your own life...perhaps you are in one now...moving from one period or era into another: A graduation or a new job, perhaps; a move to a new city, the birth of a child, or retirement. It might be a difficult move or a welcome one. In either case, times of transition can be challenging. Together as a church, we are in such a "hinge" time of transition, moving from one 'period' of ministry into another. Jennings is right, I think, to remind us not to discount the next step that must be taken. It is natural for some to experience it as a labored step while others may find it lighter. But together we are indeed stepping into a period of change, where things seem less sure or clear. Yet Jennings is on to something vital when he reminds us that we, no less than the first disciples, must take that next step. We must go forward because faith always leans forward. God always draws us on toward the future and waits for us there.

How we choose to lean forward in faith becomes our witness before others. The week after my Mom died we had her funeral and the week after that I got in the car to take Katherine, my second and last child to Texas to begin her freshman year of college. My own heaviness of heart had to make room for the newness my



daughter was ready to embrace with joy. I tried to attend to both realities in the room of my soul. In the midst of loss, I had to willfully choose to lean forward in faith, with the best of my energies and spirit. The future held possibility and opportunity for newness. It tried my faith, this leaning forward. Faith that God would meet me there... would wait for me; make a way ahead of me. To lean forward in faith requires us to trust that the gifts of the Spirit like peace, love, joy, gentleness will be ours in the future as they have been given to us in the past.

Leaning forward in faith becomes easier when we have others beside us. Acts 1:13 names the people who gathered together after Jesus' ascension into heaven. Many are familiar... Peter and John and James and Andrew and Philip and Thomas. The rest are there, too, those quieter disciples of Jesus. And Jesus' brothers are mentioned, along with "certain women," Luke writes. Among them is Mary, Jesus' mother, who has seen so much. Luke has not called her by her name since the birth narrative back in Luke, chapter 2. Of all of the people gathered together, Mary is the one who most knows that the Holy Spirit does indeed come, bidden and unbidden, and sets us on a journey of newness we could not have foreseen. This listing of names reminds us that we do not have to face transitions alone. God gives us the gift of community, often diverse in number and gifts and demographics. Our reading today ends at verse 14, offering a clue about how we might best lean forward in faith when moving from one period into another. The NRSV obscures the Greek. The beginning of the verse is better translated this way: "these all were persisting together..."ⁱⁱ They persisted together, especially in prayer. We will do best when we are persisting together, undergirded by prayer.

Beverly Gaventa, New Testament scholar, says that the Book of Acts speaks powerfully to the church in a time of either malaise or crisis. It shows us how to step forward. The Book of Acts reminds the church chapter after chapter that it does not belong to itself, but to the God of Israel, the God who raised Jesus from the dead, and the God whose witness continues within, outside, and even in spite of the church. It is the record of the church called to follow the Spirit's lead, giving evidence of God's plan and activity in the world. And the Book of Acts shows us that God not only directs us—sometimes God must also correct us. We become

* Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.



Jesus' witness through our preaching and teaching and service to others. Yet Acts adds that we are witnesses also as we hold each other accountable, living in mutual responsibility as a community of believers. Finally, Gaventa writes, the witness of the church in Acts is one of doxology—we respond to God's presence and activity in thanksgiving and praise. The author of Luke and Acts describes believers who have what Gaventa calls "a broad vocabulary of amazement, awe, rejoicing, joy, praise and prayer."ⁱⁱⁱ

In a time of transition in our personal lives or in our life together here as a church, we can voice our loss and acknowledge when our steps feel labored because the way before us is unclear. Nevertheless, we must take the next step. Faith always leans forward. God draws us always toward the future. The Holy Spirit sets us on a journey of newness.

I'm so glad Luke included the story of Jesus' ascension into heaven. We no longer have him right here in a particular place bodily on this earth. But that means that we have him now in resurrection power above all and in all and through all things everywhere and always. This story tells us how the first disciples chose to lean forward in faith. How we choose to lean is our witness now. So, I say light a candle, join a procession, bless the fruit you eat today, or the plot of earth you call your own or that of your neighbor. Rise at the dawn and listen to birdsong. Go fishing. Take a hike. Enjoy a communal meal. Pray. Hold each other accountable in the spirit of love. Speak in the broad vocabulary of awe, amazement, joy, and rejoicing and praise. Come to worship, present your children or yourself for baptism. Persist together. Because he has gone up in power we can step out, lean forward in faith.

Amen.

ⁱ Willie James Jennings, *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible: Acts* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 20.

ⁱⁱ Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Abingdon New Testament Commentary: Acts* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 68.

ⁱⁱⁱ Gaventa, 39-41.