

Ephesians 1:15-23 ~ Acts 1:1-11
And You Will Be My Witnesses
 Ascension Sunday ~ Confirmation Sunday ~ Mother's Day ~ May 13, 2018
 The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Introduction to Acts Text:

It wasn't until I was in seminary studying to become a Pastor, that the first verse of the Book of Acts was explained to me. If you hit it cold, it can be quite confusing—one of those verses we usually just take a mental leap over, another one of those strange “Bible things” they never explain to us. So I'm about to let you in on a trade secret.

The Book of Acts is actually Part II, or the sequel to the Gospel of Luke, which is Part I, of this 2-part miniseries written by Luke about Jesus. The Book of Acts is kind of like the movie “The Last Jedi” coming after “The Force Awakens” in the Star Wars series (“May the Fourth Be With You,” and all that....). So when we read in Acts 1:1 “In the first Book” Luke (not to be confused with Luke Skywalker) is referring to his Gospel. The next odd thing you will notice is that he addresses both books to someone named “Theophilus.” Who the heck is Theophilus? This name is something of a puzzle even to the experts. Most scholars believe that Theophilus was a wealthy resident of Antioch whose wife was a believer. Others, have suggested that since “Theophilus” literally means in the Greek, “friend of God” or “lover of God” that this could have been a more generic name inviting all of us as friends of God into the narrative—any who seek a deeper understanding of Christ. What a great text for Confirmation Sunday. When you read their “Statements of Faith” – (hopefully not during the sermon)...you will see we have raised seven, Theophilus's (Theophili?) who inspire and call us to grow, as well. Seven witnesses you will hear from in my sermon.

For now, having decoded v. 1, we are cleared for takeoff. So buckle your seats belts, and return your tray tables to their upright and locked positions as we prepare to hear the last words that Jesus spoke to his disciples before his lift off, or ascension, into heaven according to Luke as it is written in Acts 1:1-11.

Sermon

Preaching on Mother's Day is trickier than you might think. Ask a few preachers, and I'm pretty sure they will agree. Mother's Day doesn't really have to do with Jesus or the Christian year. And yet it's always on the 2nd Sunday in May: A great day to go to church with mom, or to remember our moms and all moms. This year, Ascension Day and Mother's Day are on the same Sunday, so if a preacher isn't careful, you may have mothers ascending into the clouds, or Jesus saying, “A mother's work is never done.”

One preacher, Dr. Dorothy Austin, an Episcopalian priest and professor, faced this preaching challenge by asking people who were different ages, what they thought she should tell her congregation on Mother's Day. First she asked a five-year

old boy and here was his advice, “Tell them that boys need chocolate cake! My mom is always on a diet. She thinks chocolate cake is bad. I think chocolate cake is good.” He was grinning, obviously relishing the chance to set the world straight on such important matters.

She said, “I’ve got it,” and then asked, “What else? Anything else you’d like me to say? Anything about Jesus, or God, or church?” He smiled kind of a wry little smile, the sort of smile a small boy can get when he’s fastened onto a good idea and knows perfectly well that he’s got a grown-up hooked and waiting, all ears, for what he’s got to say. “Tell them that up in heaven, Jesus makes chocolate cakes and God and Jesus eat them!”¹

I’m sure that some of us in this room who are *older* than 5 have also put chocolate and heaven together in the same sentence. (I won’t ask for a show of hands.) But this little boy’s advice indicates some very basic and important knowledge about our faith. He’s got Jesus ascended in heaven, sitting at the right hand of God, O.K., maybe with some chocolate crumbs around the corners of his mouth, but nevertheless, Jesus is in heaven, with God and they are creating and doing something good for all of us.

Just exactly how and when Jesus ascended into heaven after he rose from the dead, is a piece of our gospel story that our church tradition has largely ignored. Jesus’ birth, death, and resurrection have all become major holy days, but the final leg of his earthly journey, his final bodily departure is one we Presbyterians pretty much skip over. It’s in the Apostles’ Creed that we will be using to profess our faith in our service today. In this early Christian affirmation of our faith, formed by the “first century audience (not “Oddians”☺, young Lucas Paulman): “On the third day he rose again; He ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father.”

One of the reasons I think we have left this part of the story alone is that there’s so much about Jesus’ ascension we don’t know, can’t explain, nor even have language for. Luke suggests it was forty days after his resurrection and the launch point was Jerusalem. But here’s the thing: the precise when, where, and how are less important. *What we need to know* is that after appearing on this earth in bodily form to friends and disciples, Jesus ascended into heaven and took his place next to God. Maybe they had chocolate cake to celebrate. Maybe not. Most important is what our belief in the Ascension of Christ calls *us* to do and to be.

If you think about it, it’s nothing short of miraculous that this rag tag bunch of bewildered disciples, all of whom had abandoned Jesus in his hour of need, these very disciples, now standing on the edge of Jerusalem with sore necks from looking up,—these were the ones charged to spread the Good News. I imagine them standing there, grief stricken and panicky as their Lord vanished from sight; yet somehow they became witnesses to the resurrection power and hope of Christ to save the world: From Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth, i.e. Marshfield, WI. here in 2018, almost 2,000 years later. They may have felt a little

like **Hannah Halle** wrote, “ The journey I have taken so far since baptism has been one amazing and crazy adventure that has been led by my parents and family (in their case, an amazing and crazy adventure led by Jesus) but at that point they were starting on their own new journey, looking to God in new ways,” now that Jesus was no longer with them as he had been before.

You can hear their panic, maybe their regression, or perhaps you could call it their final bank shot, hoping to get Jesus back on the track they kept expecting him to take from Day 1 when they asked, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom of Israel?” (v.6) In other words, “OK, now that you’ve done your death on the cross and resurrection thing, *NOW* can you really get down to business and ride into Jerusalem on your stallion and take over the Roman Empire?” They were still expecting their old idea and vision to finally happen. They were still living under the old idea that King of Glory had come to restore their old political monarchy like back in the misremembered and highly exaggerated “good old days” of King David. Sound familiar? How often do we ask, “Is this the time when our church will get back to its good old glory days?” Or, “Is this the time when our country will get back to its good old glory day?” Wrong question. They still weren’t getting it. And when ask that question, neither are we.

With all the time they had spent with Jesus, with all that had gone down at this point, they still didn’t get the altogether different *kind* of power, Jesus modeled with his suffering, his self-emptying humility, his laying down his life for the greater good of all. They still had much to learn. And so do we. Like **Lexi Daul** wrote, “the more time I spent on my confirmation journey, exploring my beliefs, I realized that I was not sure about what I knew and what I believed.” You can hear this in that last question from the “Men of Galilee” – the Holy Spirit that would descend on them “not many days from now” would continue to open the eyes of their hearts and enlighten them about the power of Christ, that would actually come to work through them. Yes, them.

Here’s the things: It’s not about *knowing*, it’s about *trusting* the Resurrection Power of the Holy Spirit with all we do not know. It’s about *trusting* Christ who is above all, now and forever, using **Isaac Eberl’s** metaphor, the “1,111” Christ forever. Christ as Lord and Savior, putting us *all* as equals at the foot of the cross. And at the same time, each of us equally and uniquely gifted. **Lucas Paulman** put it like this: “It’s simply a fact that while we are all created in God’s image, none of us, God’s children is like anyone else. God places an immense amount of trust in us, and we in turn are obligate to place an equal, if not greater amount, in him.” Can we be witnesses to that? Jesus thinks so.

More than needing to know, we need something to grab onto, something we can see and feel. For many of us, as **Alexis Mushel** has written, “When we think of the Holy Spirit, we don’t really know what we’re thinking about. We struggle to understand the Holy Spirit.” I found a story told by the spiritual writer Anne Lamott

in her book titled, *Operating Instructions: A Journal of My Son's First Year*, which offers an image of the power of the Holy Spirit for us. It goes like this:

I have a friend named Anne, this woman I've known my entire life, who took her two-year-old up to Tahoe during the summer. They were staying in a rented condominium by the lake...One afternoon she put the baby to bed in his playpen in the pitch-dark, and went to do some work. A few minutes later she heard her baby knocking on the door from inside the room and she got up, knowing he'd crawled out of his playpen. She went to put him down again, but when she got to the door, she found he'd locked it. He had somehow managed to push in the little button on the doorknob. So he was calling to her, "Mommy, Mommy," and she was saying to him, "Jiggle the doorknob, darling," and of course he didn't speak much English—mostly he seemed to speak Urdu. After a moment, it became clear to him that his mother couldn't open the door, and the panic set in. He began sobbing. So my friend ran around like crazy trying everything possible, like trying to get the front door key to work, calling the rental agency where she left a message on the machine, calling the manager of the condominium where she left another message, and running back to check in with her son every minute or so. And there he was in the dark, this terrified little child. Finally she did the only thing she could, which was to slide her fingers underneath the door, where there was a one-inch space. She kept telling him over and over to bend down and find her fingers. Finally somehow he did. So they stayed like that for a really long time, on the floor, him holding onto her fingers in the dark. He stopped crying. She kept wanting to go call the fire department or something, but she felt that contact was the most important thing... She kept saying, "Open the door now," and every so often he'd jiggle the knob, and eventually, after maybe half an hour, it popped open.

I keep thinking of that story, how much it feels like I'm the two-year-old in the dark and God is the mother and I don't speak the language. She could break down the door if that struck her as being the best way, and ride off with me on her charger. But instead, via my friends and my church and my shabby faith, I can just hold onto her fingers underneath the door. It isn't enough, and it is.ⁱⁱ

It isn't enough and it is. We want to know more. But Jesus calls us to something different than that. Jesus calls us to be witnesses, living, breathing, praying witnesses to the first hand experience of Christ's Divine Love. As **Delaney Wichlacz** has written, "We would never be influenced to pray if it weren't for the Holy Spirit filling our hearts, and she turned to Romans 8:26-27, "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Holy Spirit intercedes."

God has given us our operating instructions for here and now. When we look at that hand reaching under the door and see the scar from the nail we know that the ascended Christ shares our pain, understands our short-sightedness, our faithlessness, our questions, our fretfulness—and keeps holding on. Christ has given us what we need to be witnesses to the love that will not let us go. The Love that will carry us through dark night. This is also the love that will not let us go on with

business as usual until all God's children know they are loved, adopted, cherished, worth something. **(Isaac Eberl)**

Christ reaches out his hand and invites us all to be a "Theophilis," a friend of God. There are no "second hand" friends. We are here to be witnesses and become first hand friends with God, with each other doing what we can to heal our broken world. As **Kate Schilling** has written, "God's plentiful love and compassion, which I now know is our duty to spread to other people. That's all we need to know."

ⁱ Dr. Dorothy Austin is an ordained minister in the Episcopalian Church. She is working on a collection of sermons currently. I cannot locate my source for her story that I found over fifteen years ago.

ⁱⁱ Anne Lamott, *Operating Instructions: A Journal of My Son's First Year*, (Anchor Books, Random House: New York, New York), p.220-221.