

May 17, 2020

Ascension Day 2020
Good-bye for Now
Acts 1:1-11

Opening words: Numbers are important in the Bible. Take the number 40. The rain fell forty days and nights on Noah's generation. Moses lived 120 years. The first forty years he lived in Egypt. The next forty years he lived in Midian. The last forty years Moses led God's Chosen People in the wilderness. Moses and Elijah both fasted for forty days. Ezekiel laid on his right side for forty days to "bear the iniquity" of Judea's sins. The spies explored Canaan for forty days. Saul, David, and Solomon each reigned for forty years. Jesus fasted forty days before he was tempted, and forty days Jesus appeared in his resurrected state. In the Bible forty represents sacredness.

This Thursday, May 21, is the fortieth day after Easter. That means this Thursday is Ascension Day. It will not be remembered outside of the church, but we will remember the ascension of Jesus today. The reason is simple. It was an important day in God's plan of salvation for the world. Our scripture reading for today is Acts 1:1-11. It tells a story we should never forget. Let me call this message *Good-bye for Now*.

Acts 1:1-11 ¹ In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach ² until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. ³ After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. ⁴ On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. ⁵ For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." ⁶ Then they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷ He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." ⁹ After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. ¹⁰ They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ¹¹ "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

When I was young, Americans played a sport called baseball. It was called our national past-time. It was so popular that professional baseball leagues were formed and the truly gifted at baseball were paid handsome sums. Perhaps, the most gifted of all the professional baseball players was a man named Babe Ruth (1895-1948). He played for

the hated New York Yankees. He not only changed the game. Many believe he saved the game. In 1927, Babe Ruth became the first player to hit sixty home runs in a single season. He hit 714 home runs in his career and had a career batting average of .342. In 1923, he hit .393. He was one of the first five to be voted into baseball's Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York. Time can be cruel.

By June 1948, the great Babe Ruth was only a shell of his younger self. He had terminal cancer. Everyone accepted the reality. He would never see Labor Day. He was 53 years old. It was the Yankee organization who decided to plan a Babe Ruth Day. It would be June 13, 1948 at "The House That Ruth Built, Yankee Stadium. Babe Ruth Day would give the fans one more opportunity to express their appreciation. Goodbyes are never easy, especially when you will never see the person again. With that in mind, let us look at the scripture lesson together.

We find ourselves in the first chapter of Acts. The first three verses summarize the entire Gospel of Luke. Remember, Acts is the sequel of Luke. Both were written to Theophilus, one who loves God. Verse four is the beginning of something new. According to the text, Jesus had gathered the disciples around him. He tells them about the coming of the Holy Spirit. Soon, the divine helper will touch each one of them and enable them to be his witnesses throughout the world. The only thing they had to do to was wait in Jerusalem. This is the truth. The disciples do not have a clue. They expose their ignorance when they asked Jesus about the completion of the kingdom of Israel. Jesus redirects the discussion back to the Holy Spirit. Then something happens that no one expects. Verse nine says he was taken up. He levitated off the ground and raised so high that he was covered by a cloud. Not believing their own eyes, they were in awe. With squinting eyes and bent necks, they strain to get their last view of Jesus. It must have been one of those moments in life that they never forgot. Hoping for one more view of Jesus, two men dressed in white had to nudge them back to reality.

The disciples must have been overwhelmed as they stood there. It was almost cruel to expect the disciples to accept so much in such a short amount of time. In short, they were in awe. They were awed by their past, present, and future.

First, they were awed by what they had experienced. Think of everything they had experienced with Jesus. Time is not always what is important. They had only been with Jesus for three years. How many relationships do you have that are older than three years? Just think about everything they had experienced during those three years! There is more to a relationship than time. There is significance.

Second, they were in awe of what they were experiencing. It really is an outrageous scene. The words in the scripture lesson are just shadows of what really happened. How do you describe a miracle? How do you describe ascension? When was the last time your words could not capture an experience?

Third, the disciples were awed by what they would experience. They were pre-Pentecost disciples. They have just been told they are to go into the world and witness for about Jesus. I cannot think of one group less qualified for this task. They knew very little. They understood very little. They were unprepared and unequipped. You would be hard pressed to find a group that was more impotent. They were in awe because of the things they would experience in the future. However, this is equally true.

The disciples did not have the time to process the significance of that experience. Two thousand years later, we see it clearly. The ascension of Jesus was part of God's plan of salvation for the world. God planned from the very beginning to enter this world. He did not come as a mighty warrior. He came as a tiny baby. We celebrate Christmas with full hearts because we recognize Jesus to be the very incarnation of God. At the age of thirty, Jesus started a three-year ministry. That is even a short appointment within the world of the United Methodist Church. Yet, during that three-year period, Jesus taught about the Kingdom of God in a powerful way. The crowds followed which made the orthodox leaders of his faith insecure. They decide Jesus must be eliminated, so they come up with a sinister plan. You know the plan. One of Jesus's own, Judas Iscariot, betrays Jesus. While praying, he is arrested in the garden and is tried twice, once by his own people, once by the Roman governor Pilate. He is the one who ordered the execution. Jesus died on a Friday afternoon and the few who loved him grieved. He is placed in a new tomb. A massive stone was placed tightly at the opening of the cave so the smell of Jesus's decaying body would not escape. Guards were posted in front of the tomb to eliminate any future problems. For Jesus's enemies the problems were just beginning. After the Sabbath, on Sunday, women show up at the tomb of Jesus. They are the ones who make the great discovery. Miraculously, Jesus had returned to life and for the next forty days Jesus appeared to various believers proving his was a bodily resurrection. Sometimes the resurrected Jesus appeared to small groups and sometimes the resurrected Jesus appeared to large crowds.

That all leads us to today, Ascension Day. That is the day Jesus exited this world and entered heaven. The ascension of Jesus is important because it reminds of two things in the Christian faith. First, it reminds us of the supremacy of Jesus. He is our only hope of salvation. Second, it reminds us of the existence of heaven, itself. On day Jesus did not just say, "Good-bye" to the disciples. That is the day Jesus said, "Good-bye for now," to the disciples. The Master knew they would be reunited again in heaven in the future. Oswald Chambers (1874-1917) was an early-twentieth-century Scottish Baptist and Holiness Movement evangelist and teacher. He once said, "*At His ascension our Lord entered heaven, and he keeps the door open for humanity to enter.*" This is a fair question to ask you today?

Do you believe in the existence of heaven? In 2015, the Pew Research Group told us only 72% of all Americans believe heaven exists. That figure does not really surprise me. In a world that turns to science and technology to solve all our problems, heaven is

a stretch. To that crowd the ascension is foolishness. Do you believe natural law was suspended enabling Jesus to ascend into heaven? Just think about it.

The understanding of the cosmos has changed. In Biblical times, the masses believed heaven was up there. So when Jesus ascended above the clouds, he was entering heaven, itself. In our time, modern aviation has permitted many to ascend above the clouds. I, myself, have looked down on the clouds and into lower level of the earth's atmosphere. In 1969, mankind landed on the moon for the first time. From that distance the earth is beautiful but there is no scene of heaven. Voyager 1 reached interstellar space. From that distance the earth is nothing more than a light blue dot, but there is no sign of heaven. So let me ask you the question again. Do you believe heaven exists? Everyone must answer that question for themselves.

This is my answer – YES! I cannot give you scientific proof or a mathematical equation to prove the existence of heaven. I cannot give you a location or a dimension. The only thing I can give you a testimony. We have all heard the stories of people who have visited heaven and have returned home to report. Those stories are important because they give us hope. If you do not believe in heaven, then you are living without hope. If heaven does not exist, then there is no hope of a reunion with loved ones. When they die, we just say, "Good-bye," because it is over. If heaven does exist, then there is hope of a reunion with loved ones. When they die, we say, "Good-bye for now," because we believe we will see them again. That is something worth pondering. If that makes you think say, "**Amen!**" Let me end with this story.

When I was about ten years old, my family vacationed in the state of Maine. I have fond memories of that trip. The five of us climbed into our tiny family car and saw the sites. We went to Maine for one reason. It was the home state of my father's stepmother, my Grandma Helen. She was the only grandmother I ever knew on that side. My biological grandmother had died eight years before I was born. One day on that trip, we connected with my grandparents in a place near Boothbay Harbor. It was on the Atlantic coast. We met at the small home owned my Grandma Helen's cousins Mary and Marge. They hosted everyone for lunch. I do not remember the menu, but I do remember the scenery. Maine's rocky coastline was impressive, and the air was brisk. I enjoyed the surf crashing against the rocks.

It must have been late in the afternoon when we started saying goodbye. I remember standing near my mother and sisters. My grandfather thanked the ladies for their hospitality and jumped into the car. My Grandma Helen lagged to say good-bye to her elderly cousins. At first, they were just talking. Then, they started hugging. Finally, they started crying. The emotions made an uncomfortable scene. One of my sisters asked our mother, "Why are they crying?" My mother answered, "When you are their age, you don't know if you are going to see each other again. This may be their final goodbye."

I hate to say this one week after Mother's Day, but my mother was wrong! In the Christian faith there is no good-byes between believers. There are only good-byes for now. Someday we will be reunited again with departed loved ones in heaven. Do you remember what Oswald Chambers said? He was not wrong. He said, "*At His ascension our Lord entered heaven, and he keeps the door open for humanity to enter.*" And all of God's people say, "**Amen!**"