

HEAR WHAT THE SPIRIT IS SAYING

In Scripture and Prayer and The Great Cloud of Witnesses

Ascension Day, May 26, 2022

Collect for Ascension Day

Almighty God, whose blessed Son our Savior Jesus Christ ascended far above all heavens that he might fill all things: Mercifully give us faith to perceive that, according to his promise, he abides with his Church on earth, even to the end of the ages; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen. ~BCP 226

Acts 1:1-11 NRSV 1989

¹In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning ²until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. ⁴While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; ⁵for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

⁶So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸But 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." ⁹When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. ¹¹They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Ephesians 1:15-23 NRSV 1989

¹⁵I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason ¹⁶I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. ¹⁷I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, ¹⁸so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, ¹⁹and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his

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great power. ²⁰God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. ²²And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, ²³which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Luke 24:44-53 NRSV 1989

⁴⁴Then [Jesus] said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” ⁴⁵Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

⁵⁰Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. ⁵¹While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. ⁵²And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; ⁵³and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Psalm 47 BCP 650

- 1 Clap your hands, all you peoples; * shout to God with a cry of joy.
- 2 For the Lord Most High is to be feared; *
he is the great King over all the earth.
- 3 He subdues the peoples under us, * and the nations under our feet.
- 4 He chooses our inheritance for us, * the pride of Jacob whom he loves.
- 5 God has gone up with a shout, *
the Lord with the sound of the ram’s-horn.
- 6 Sing praises to God, sing praises; *
sing praises to our King, sing praises.
- 7 For God is King of all the earth; * sing praises with all your skill.
- 8 God reigns over the nations; * God sits upon his holy throne.
- 9 The nobles of the peoples have gathered together *
with the people of the God of Abraham.
- 10 The rulers of the earth belong to God, * and he is highly exalted.

✿ Supplemental Resources ✿

Commentary on Acts 1:1-11

By Jerusha Matsen Neal an Assistant Professor of Homiletics at Duke Divinity School.

As I write this commentary, Ascension Day is still two months away, and bombs are falling in Ukraine. I pray for peace but doubt a ceasefire is near. I would be thankful to be wrong. Call it Lenten circumspection or pandemic wariness. Call it weariness of a world in perpetual turmoil or lack of faith. By any name, Eastertide seems distant. Ascension seems more distant still.

But Jesus' ascension in Acts is no text of glory. It is a text that stands with those in countries far from home, those whose witness has been costly, and those who do not see "convincing proofs" (verse 3) of resurrection. It is, in fact, a passage about a community of faith that relinquishes the "proof" of Christ's risen body for the "promise" of a Spirit (verses 4-5) coming. One might question the wisdom of such a trade. I would welcome "convincing proofs" these days. Acts, however, is clear that proofs are not the point. Jesus' body is neither physical evidence nor "phantasm."¹ Acts does not allow Jesus' body to be conscripted by nationalism or commodified for gain. It is not dissected for its DNA. In its ascension, Jesus' body resists human control. And in its place, his disciples are called to the work of waiting for a promise fulfilled. Promises require trust; they gain efficacy through relationship. And this is where Acts begins: in empty-handed dependence.

The promise the disciples are given is a promise of Spirit-generated power, but this is power of a very particular sort. "This power will have a purpose," Matthew Skinner writes, "to make these ordinary people into Jesus' witnesses across the Roman world."² Marvin McMickle's memorable definition of a witness is striking in its simplicity and depth: a witness sees something, says something, and suffers something.³ The rest of Acts teases out the relation of the Spirit to each of these categories. Very little in Acts is as it seems. Men become blind to gain spiritual sight (9:8-9). Jailers are captives and prisoners free (Acts 16:27-30). Spirit-filled preachers are sometimes celebrated (2:41) and other times stoned (7:55-60). The power promised is not the power of persuasion—or even protection. It is the power of discernment and courage. It is a power that creates a new community and upends the expectations of a militarized, fearful world.

I read tonight of churches in Budapest standing vigil at train stations to welcome arriving refugees. In Warsaw, sanctuaries have been filled with mattresses to serve as shelters. In western Ukraine, pastors like Rev. Volodymyr Prokip are providing food and temporary shelter to those headed out of the country. "God is with those who are crying," he says.⁴

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Communities are being formed, not by bombs that fall from the sky, but by those praying in upper rooms and basement halls who witness to a different way.

That witness has a cost.

On the Sunday known as “Forgiveness Sunday,” Father Ioann Burdin, a Russian Orthodox priest, stood in Resurrection Church in Russia’s western Kostroma region and denounced the war that his country had begun. He was later arrested for “discrediting Russian armed forces.”⁵

Ascension Day is full of glorious theological truths. It is, in the words of Malcom Guites’s beautiful Ascension sonnet, when “earth became a part of Heaven’s story.”⁶ But Acts doesn’t yet know these wonders. Ascension Day, for Acts’s disciples, looks more like trust in the face of uncertainty. It looks more like prayerful commitment and costly witness. It looks a lot like today.

Notes

1. Willie Jennings, *Acts* (Louisville: WJK Press, 2017), 15.
2. Matthew Skinner, *Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel: Encountering the Divine in the Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2015), 5.
3. Marvin McMickle, *Be My Witness: The Great Commission for Preachers* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2016), 62.
4. Urs Schweizer and Sam Hodges, “United Methodists in and near Ukraine help refugees,” *UM News*, March 3, 2022, <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/united-methodists-in-and-near-ukraine-help-refugees>.
5. Isabel Van Brugen, “Russian Priest Arrested for Delivering Sermon Against Ukraine War,” *Newsweek*, March 7, 2022, <https://www.newsweek.com/russian-priest-arrested-delivering-sermon-anti-war-against-ukraine-1685436>.
6. Malcolm Guite, “Ascension Day,” June 2, 2011, <https://malcolmguite.wordpress.com/2011/06/02/ascension-day-sonnet/>.

Working Preacher Post for May 26, 2022.
<https://bit.ly/Learn155> | Accessed April 27, 2022.