

Scripture: Acts 1:1-11

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After 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. While 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; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But 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." When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They 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."

### **Sermon: The Footprints of Jesus**

The church as you may know has its own calendar. Just as we keep track of time and seasons of the year by using calendars that provide us with opportunities to observe, commemorate, and celebrate certain events, so the church also moves through changing seasons which provide us with recurring opportunities to celebrate the Christian Faith in worship. This calendar, sometimes called *the church year*, is carefully and thoughtfully designed and has been in place for centuries.

The first half of the Christian Church year focuses on the life and ministry of Jesus, centered around two major events.

Advent, Christmas and Epiphany and  
then Lent, Holy Week, and Easter, ending at Pentecost (next Sunday).

Moving through these seasons and celebrations Sunday after Sunday becomes for us an annual spiritual journey as we kneel at the manger, walk the streets of Jerusalem, stand beneath the cross, witness the resurrection, and receive the Holy Spirit!

The 2nd half of the year after Pentecost is called Ordinary Time, from the word "ordinal," which simply means counted time (First Sunday after Pentecost, etc.). The themes of Ordinary Time focus on the purpose of the church in the world, and what it means to be the people of God.

Most Christian churches follow the same calendar, although some traditions, like the Orthodox, are on a slightly different cycle.

I love following the church calendar. It helps me to feel connected to Christians around the globe and through time. I also like to think of it as the "Made for church mini-series of the faith." Just like the drama series we watch on TV, each week is its own little drama which fits into the

bigger drama of the entire season. And while each Sunday could stand alone, it's a more interesting and deeper experience to follow the bigger story, week after week.

So where are we today in this great drama of the faith? Today we celebrate the Ascension of Jesus – quite literally the “going up” of Jesus to his father in Heaven.

Ascension Day was actually on Thursday which was exactly 40 days from Easter. (The 40 days recall to our minds the 40 days of the Israelites in the wilderness and the 40 days of Jesus' temptation in the desert.)

Ascension Day is like the episode they run right before a holiday where the final scene is a huge cliffhanger, leaving the story in mid-thought, requiring you to tune in next week to see how it ends.

This whole season, beginning with Lent which began way back at the end of February, through the dark of winter and anticipation of Jesus' final week, has been a season of high drama. Then the story intensifies as we move from Palm Sunday through the Last Supper of Maundy Thursday and Jesus' death on Good Friday.

And just when we think we can heave a final sigh of sadness, shake our heads, and return to our ordinary lives, we hear that Jesus did not stay dead, but that he lives again. And in fact he's showing up at meal times and hanging out with his old friends again.

It seems too good to be true! But then, just when we are getting used to the risen Lord appearing here and there, something else bizarre happens. Jesus tells his friends to stay in Jerusalem and to wait there for the promise of the Father; that they will be baptized with the Holy Spirit in a few days that they will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes and that they will be his witnesses not just where they live, but to the ends of the earth.

Then things get really weird – think *Twilight Zone* or *X Files* or *Stranger Things* (depending on your generation). Jesus is lifted up and a cloud takes him out of their sight. Then, as they're looking up where he went, two men appear in white robes asking why they're looking up, and offering a cryptic prophecy that Jesus will come again.

Clearly, we're poised on the edge of something – not quite sure what – the power of the Holy Spirit we're told, but that's pretty vague. So what is going with the ascension and why is it so important for us?

One way to answer this question is by noticing Jesus' use of the word *witness*. Because while there were no witnesses to his Resurrection, there **were** witnesses to his Ascension.

Before he goes, Jesus says – no – he commands them to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Jerusalem was their immediate surroundings – their “home church” so to speak. Judea was the region around them. Samaria was the region “over there”; where people looked and talked differently and had different customs and traditions. And the ends of the earth – well, that would be everywhere beyond

And the church today, if it is to be the church of Jesus Christ, will obey this command. Because, we too are not just called, but are commanded to witness to Christ – which means to point out his work in the world – in many places... the town of Concord, eastern Mass., in places where people don't live and believe as we do and in places far away, where we might never think to go if it weren't in Christ's name

Because a church which spends all its time, energy and resources on itself is not the church of Jesus Christ, nor is the church which is so focused on mission it ignores its own folk. The purpose of the church here is to witness to Christ, both here and everywhere; and I would add, not just everywhere, but in everything the church does.

And our mission is to go into the world as God's people, and proclaim a transforming message about a suffering God who calls anyone and everyone, without discrimination, to respond to His great love.

It's not a popular message. In fact, it's scandalous. But being the church is not about being popular; it's about being faithful. And while being a faithful church of Jesus Christ is an honorable endeavor, it's not easy. Because we are easily sidetracked into other ventures.

And that's why the Ascension is so important for us. It reminds us of our center - Jesus, and our purpose - witnessing, or pointing, to Jesus in all we do.

Another aspect of the Ascension that applies to us is that Jesus asks his disciples to **wait** there in Jerusalem. This is the "cliff hanger" nature of this day – It's like part one in a 2-episode mini-series of the faith.

And it can be a hard word to hear - to just **wait**. It is far easier to recruit people for a cause, or for a program, than it is to ask them to wait. And yet here, before the church can be the church, we must wait for the power of the Holy Spirit in order to carry out its mission. The Bible is clear: we simply cannot do what God has called us to do on any level without his help.

And, the enabling power for which we are waiting is not something we can generate or make happen by our own efforts. It is a gift of God, given in God's own time and in his own way. And it is marvelous when it comes.

In fact, the Holy Spirit enabled Jesus' disciples (who were present at his Ascension) to storm the world with the message of the Gospel. But first they must wait. And they must wait without Jesus, relying only on his promise that he will send the Holy Spirit.

But our waiting is not a passive, couch potato waiting. Because while Jesus' ascension left his disciples looking up to heaven, we are more likely to see evidence of his time on earth by looking around.

Often, when the Ascension is depicted in art, the artist will include a set of footprints where Jesus had been standing before he went up to heaven. And you know, when visiting that

place, no one stands there looking up! Everyone's eyes are directed DOWN into this impression, a footprint (though after all these years it is not in the shape of a foot anymore).

And that's, I believe, as it should be. Because while we're this side of heaven, this is where we're going to see Jesus' footprints. Because as we follow Jesus, the best way to stay on track, is to follow in his footprints.

But they might seem hard to spot these days, given our distance in both time and space from when he was walking around in the flesh. Which is why I'm so glad we have the witness of so many who've gone before us to show us where he's been.

After all, Jesus' footprints are all over the pages of the gospels. We can see Jesus' footprints in the wilderness as he faces each temptation under the strain of hunger and thirst. We see his wet footprints on the jagged rocks along the Sea of Galilee as Jesus called his disciples. We see them northward across the West Bank to sit with the Samaritan woman at the well. We see his footprints crossing to the other side of the Jericho road to bind up the wounds of the man beaten by robbers. We see the dirty, muddy footprints of Jesus all over the floor of the upper room where he put his own disciples first by washing their feet. We see the blood-stained footprints going up to Golgotha, loving us to the end.

It's as if Jesus were leaving behind a road map for us to follow. In fact I believe he's left his footprints all over the place down here. I wonder... where have you seen Jesus' footprints?

Have you seen someone resist temptation? Or be a positive influence on someone else? Or maybe it was you who offered encouragement to someone facing soul crushing criticism. Or physically cared for someone in need. Or perhaps someone surprised you with an act of service or sacrifice. This is what the footprints of Jesus look like.

There is an old legend about the Ascension - about the moment when Jesus arrived in heaven. It is said that the angel Gabriel met him at the gates of the heavenly city, and said, "Lord, this is a great salvation that you have accomplished during your time on earth!"

But Jesus only said, "Yes."

"Well, what plans have you made for carrying on the work, now that you're back here? How will others know what you have done?" he asked.

"Well, I left Peter and James and John and Martha and Mary to tell their friends, their friends to tell their friends, and so on until the whole world knows. The Holy spirit will help them of course."

"But Jesus," Gabriel said, "what if Peter is too busy with his fishing business, or Martha with the housework, or the friends they tell are too distracted and forget to tell their friends? What then?"

Jesus did not answer right away. Then he said in his quiet, confident voice, "I have not made any other plans. I am counting on them."

What a privilege to be the ones Jesus is counting on!  
Amen!