
Ascension 2020
Acts 1:1-12 & Luke 24:36-53

Today, forty days after Jesus rose from the dead, we celebrate the feast of His Ascension. On the 40th day, Christ's physical presence on Earth ended. But before leaving, Jesus' last words may have seemed like a mixed message to his disciples. At first, He told them they would be his witnesses "to the ends of the earth." And in the same breath He told them to stay in Jerusalem and wait. It was not the first time the disciples were confused by Jesus' words. Neither was it the first time Jesus' confusing words turned out to be full of wisdom and truth.

Life has a way of putting us also on hold. Frequently we find ourselves in situations that require us to wait instead of act. For those who are impatient by nature, waiting can be stressful. Athletes tell us that one of the most tedious aspects of the competition is waiting for the game to begin. Those seeking employment remain eager to discover if they got the job. Those who have been to see a doctor are curious to learn the results of a medical examination. There are a lot of undercurrents going on in waiting. Waiting is not necessarily an inactive pastime. The dictionary says "wait" means "to stay in place in expectation of," "to remain stationary in readiness or expectation," "to look forward expectantly." There is waiting, and there is waiting! Jack, confiding in his friend one day said, "From the moment I was twelve, I fell in love with a girl in my class and wanted to marry her. And let me tell you it was hell, sheer hell, waiting to do something about it."

Waiting must be a very trying experience for those who are impatient by nature. For example, a man was giving his friend a ride home from work. When they left the parking building, they had to wait for an electronic gate to open and let them out. Since it was a slow gate, the passenger asked the driver, "Are you impatient?" The driver said, "I can get pretty impatient about some things, but I don't think I'm impatient by nature." The other man said, "I am impatient by nature. I want everything to happen right now." That is how our society is today.

We all get impatient about some things. High on the list for most people is being put on hold on the telephone. You place a call to a business with a specific need. Someone answers to identify the company and asks if they can help you. You tell them in considerable detail what you want. They say, "Could you hold just a minute, please?" And so, you wait. Soon seconds turn into minutes and then half an hour has passed. But you hold, being entertained by prerecorded music, or worse, an advertisement for this business. When a live voice finally comes back on, it is someone different who is asking how they

can help. You may feel like saying, "It's about time!" but you hold your tongue and start all over again explaining your problem.

Jesus, at a critical time in the lives of his disciples, instructed them to wait. He put them on hold, something they neither welcomed nor understood. They had been on an emotional roller coaster following Jesus for three years, believing they knew where He was going. Then their world turned upside down. In a single week, they saw their master acclaimed as the Messiah and then crucified. At their lowest point, they learned the incredible truth that Jesus was alive again.

Jesus had been raised from the dead! Now they knew they were finally on the winning side. They were ready to turn the world upside down. They had big news to tell. Then, as part of His last words to them, Jesus told them to wait. He put them on hold. "Stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high." (Lk 24:49) He asked them, "not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for 'the promise of the Father.'" (Acts 1:4) It was an almost unbearable order. Wait! But they did wait week after week. Finally, their waiting ended on the day of Pentecost.

The disciples discovered that Jesus' ascension is not about his absence but his presence. It is not about his leaving but about "the fullness of him who fills all in all." It is not about a location but a relationship. Presence, fullness, and bonding must be what lies behind the question of the men in white, "Why do you stand looking up to heaven?" It is as if they are saying to us, "Don't misunderstand and disfigure this moment. Don't deny yourselves the gift that He gives you."

Jesus' ascent completes the resurrection with His victory over death. The ascension, however, lifts humanity to heaven and seats us, you, and me, at the right hand of God the Father. We now partake of God's glory and divinity.

The disciples of Jesus kept thinking they had reached the end of their life with Him. When he died on the cross, they fell into despair, knowing that all was lost. When He ascended into heaven, they were bewildered and felt mournful. Pentecost brought the gift of Christ's Spirit as a living and influential presence in their lives. From that time forward, until the end of their lives, they discovered that Jesus' promise to be with them was real, and they faced life and death assured of an ultimate reunion with him in heaven.

Amen!