

Sermon for Ascension Sunday
May 16, 2021

Do you remember back before the days of Netflix? Now you can binge a whole series in one night. But time was when you had to wait for episodes to come out week by week, *gasp*. It could be an excruciating 7 days between episodes, patiently anticipating what would happen to your favorite characters. Sometimes they would have two-part episodes with a major cliffhanger. At the end of the episode there would be a freeze-frame with the words “To be continued...”

The episode would end with something so shocking and interest-peak that it made sure you would come back the next week to find out what happened. At the beginning of the next episode there would be a recap of what had happened the week before, just in case you forgot. As if that was possible!

I’m not sure we get the exact same feeling from the gospel reading today in Luke.

Maybe it’s the difference 2000 years makes in the style of dramatic cliffhangers.

“Then [Jesus] 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.” To be continued...

The question that has us biting our nails is what the disciples will do next!

Stay tuned!

Participants of our bible in 90 Days class know that when read straight through you have to go through John's gospel before getting to the book of Acts. Which is the next episode of the gospel of Luke. The same author wrote both and intended *The Acts of the Apostles* to be Act II of the Story of Jesus. So, the next time you want to binge read the Bible, may I suggest you go straight through from Luke to Acts?

There has always been media offering us an enhancement to the message of Christ crucified and risen. In between bible times and now the visual arts were one medium that helped to make more tangible the story of Jesus in the lives of the faithful. There is one depiction from the 16th century that captures this moment in the book of Acts. The moment when Jesus is ascending into heaven. Though a number of artists attempted to bring *The Ascension* to life, Hans Suss von Kulmbach caught it just right. His work is hanging in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in NYC. In it only Jesus' feet are visible at the very top of the painting. The disciples are clustered in a crowd below. *No social distancing was necessary then!* They stare up at the soles of Jesus' feet. Necks straining, tilted so far back that it almost hurts to focus on them. And so we turn our attention to where their gazes are focused. They can't bear to tear their eyes away from the last glimpse of the risen Christ in their midst. One man in the center of the frame shows us the bottom of his bearded chin; his mouth opened enough to see his tongue. They are frozen like that. Staring up into heaven for the last 500 years since Hans put paint to canvas.

Now we use different media, but our inclination is the same as it has always been. A desire to bring to life the Story of Jesus, so that people will actually be moved by it. With recording our worship the last year, it does feel like we are tuning in to church sometimes. Gawking at our screens as we try to comprehend what the risen Jesus means to us when we click off YouTube. Do we just hit pause and wait patiently throughout the week for the next video to drop?

“[People] 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.” Snap out of it!

After a year that has felt a bit like we are stuck in suspended animation -- our normal lives on hold -- we might need to hear this message more now than ever. The followers of Jesus in all times and places faced the challenges of their particular time. From those very first apostles, who stood there gawking as Jesus left them as he drifted further and further away. Wondering what next. To the churches Paul started up in the generation or so after that, who struggled with disagreements among them about how to be true followers of Christ. To the followers of Jesus who so wrongly interpreted his command to witness to the ends of the earth; doing so by force with weapons and enslavement. To the followers today wondering what the risen Christ means to us in the midst of pandemics of disease, climate crises, political divisions and systemic racism.

The Ascension of Jesus takes place 40 days after he appears to his disciples following his resurrection. Traditionally this is 10 days before the great festival of Pentecost. We have moved it to Sunday rather than keeping it on Thursday, so that we don't miss this event that is part of our statement of faith in the creeds of the church – we believe Jesus ascended into heaven. And it functions as the pause button or the freeze-frame between episodes. Like the “To be continued...” of God's dramatic series. What will happen next? Now that Jesus has gone in bodily form, how will his followers continue on?

Since Ascension points us ahead, I will give you a spoiler. The theme of Pentecost season is Co-Mission. Next week we will hear the story of the disciples gathered together, still wondering what is next. Before the winds of change sweep through the house and the Holy Spirit drives them out to carry forth what Jesus hands off to them – the task of taking the good news of Christ as far as they can imagine, even the ends of the earth.

Oh yeah, I forgot to mention there will be some guest stars in the next episode of the Story of Jesus. The author of Luke-Acts begins their second episode with an address to Theophilus. A Greek name that means “God-lover.” This character is played by none other than...wait for it...

If you have a mirror with you, you might want to take out....

It's you! It's us!

You see, thing is that we cannot wait to see what happens to the characters in the Story of Jesus. Because we are the main actors in this drama.

So, if you want really want to know what's next, then *you* have to do something. *We* have to do something. That's what makes the lives of the followers of Jesus still so challenging. 2000 years removed from the bodily risen Christ standing in our midst, it doesn't get any easier. We may even envy those first disciples, who had the benefit of all those "convincing proofs" of the risen Lord Jesus before he was ascended into heaven and seated at the right hand in glory. All we have are the stories of the faithful passed down to us from generation to generation to generation, on back to those first witnesses of these things.

If our mission statement at St. John's is to Live God's Love in the World, what does it mean that we are 'Theophili -- Lovers of God?

This is our part to play as we live out the drama of the risen Christ in our lives. As we make it known to the people who need to hear it. Need to see it manifested in the midst of hopelessness, grief and fear. We've had a lot of that this past year. And the followers of Jesus, the risen Christ, cannot afford to hit pause on the co-mission we have been given.

The thing about a life of faith is that each of us individually and collectively as the Body of Christ in the world, helps to write the next episode of the Story of Jesus.

I wonder what will happen next. Stay tuned!