

Before we turn to the Acts passage recalling the ascension of Jesus, I have a few questions I would like to ask leading in.

What is it that urges you on? And by “on” I mean to continue in the way in which you were going and to advance to the next level. Is it the success you accomplish? Is it a sense of self pride and confidence? Is it bragging rights? Is it accomplishing the next step as a means to an end? Is it survival? Is fear a motivator for you? Is it to prove someone else wrong or meet expectations placed on you? Is it that challenges have a way of motivating you? Is it faith or a reminder of Jesus and his journeys and example that inspire you? I wore one of those W.W.J.D. bracelets in college when I ran, and it had a way of urging me on to keep on running when all I wanted to do was fall to the ground. Maybe we are like the little train that could, and we use mindfulness to urge on, “I think I can, I think I can.” Think of something you have continued to do throughout your life and if possible, have it be something that you have advanced in, either by your own standards or the acknowledgement of a board or judge or development in skill. What is it that urged you on?

Now I want to shift gears slightly and ask the countermeasure. What is something that, if there is something you know of, that has caused you to stop in your tracks, throw up your hands, and simply stop your momentum, either temporarily or permanently? Was it an event that happened? Was it that someone had to leave or did leave? Maybe someone close to you passed away? Was it self-awareness that you couldn’t keep doing whatever you were doing? Was it stop or else? Was it another opportunity that presented itself? Was it fear? Was someone else going to get hurt if you didn’t stop?

More specifically now, I wonder how it is we will, we can, have the power to go on after something like a shooting rampage cripples our small town by taking the lives of the most vulnerable and innocent, or after a tornado powers through our property leaving us wondering where we are to even start cleaning up much less rebuild, or after a doctor looks us in the eye and our stomach falls at the news we have an illness that could take our life, or after a friend or mentor decides to move on to other adventures leaving us with a void to fill? How will we, can we, have the power to go on when we can’t even imagine taking another step? Hundreds of thousands of people, might I even say millions of people, wonder this very thing every day, and there is a really good chance we are among them.

To answer these questions about ourselves and many more related ones, we can turn to a myriad of self-help books and practices, Facebook or other social media feeds, cultural

remedies and habits, and, as I would like to suggest we do today, we can turn in scripture to the Acts of the Apostle's. Acts is a great book in the bible. If you have questions about the early church turn to the Acts of the Apostle's. It is essentially the second chapter of writings done by Luke. His first was the gospel of Luke and his second the Acts of the Apostle's. Acts is a book without end, in which some scholars and teachers like to use to inspire us, as Christians today, to consider our role in the continuous writing of God's story and God's church as it actively unfolds in real time. That is right, if this is true, you and I are starring in the modern-day Acts of the Apostle's as a part of God's story. I wonder how our characters are portrayed.

Nevertheless, a foundational theme throughout Acts of the Apostle's, as we will underline this week and next, is how the apostles throughout history, including us today, indeed have power to go on. And not just any power, but THE power of God through the Holy Spirit.

Acts unpacks specifically how the apostles were to have the power to go on after Jesus, the ultimate example and their primary teacher, ascended to be with God in heaven. Without Jesus physically present, the apostles wondered how it was that they could possibly continue and be the ones to embody who Jesus was and what Jesus did and taught. As God promises, God does not leave them alone without assurance of care and power.

Read Acts 1:1-11

A bit of liturgical dialogue about the ascension of Jesus as we work back into the questions we started with today.

The Birth, Life, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension are five monumental events in the life of Jesus I often refer to together. The first four we often know, no matter how much we might get or understand them, but the fifth is often left unattended to. However, if we leave it unattended, it could be argued that the first four have value without fulfillment.

So, let's tend to the ascension of Jesus for a moment. When we proclaim the ascension part of the gospel, what exactly are we proclaiming? We do not, as a matter of fact, believe that Jesus ended his earthly ministry with the equivalent of a rocket launch, rising a few hundred miles above the earth. Nor do we think Jesus was the first to be "beamed up," to use the term made so familiar by *Star Trek*. The great religious art of medieval Europe showed Jesus just above the clouds. We could stand here, point up, and say that Jesus went there, thinking that he could look down on us through the clouds, as we might from the window of an airplane.

The disciples watched as Jesus went up. What were they witnessing, if not the first stage of something that resembled a launch? To answer it fully we must connect the ascension with resurrection for they are tied together as two parts of a single whole. Together they constitute one sweeping 40-day movement that brings the obedient Christ not just from the grave to the skies but from hell and godlessness to the place of highest honor at the right hand of God the Father. (Phil. 2:5-11) The distance bridged in this movement of resurrection and exaltation is measured in the amount of evil and destruction that separates us from God. It is not the force of gravity that must be overcome, but the forces of sin, death, hell, and annihilation.

Where was Jesus raised to? He was raised into the coming glory of the Father. "Jesus is risen into the coming kingdom of God." Jesus Christ, sent from the very heart of God, is raised in power and exalted in glory. Resurrection and ascension, tied together as they are, are themselves part of a larger narrative of the triune God. From there the story of divine love goes on to include the sending of the Holy Spirit, whose work is the transformation of the creation until all things are gathered up in the endless fellowship of the living God.

One author comments, "the ascension of Jesus is a moment of loss and transition, as well as a moment of glory." Another author comments, "the ascension of Jesus reveals to us the transfiguration and the gathering up that is to come at the end." To both I would say Alleluia amen. God, may it be so for us all?!

A few highlight reels from the story provide us with pillars to stand upon today. Each lead us to the power to go on.

1. Jesus clearly calls the disciples to be witnesses to Jesus' teachings and ways. This is the transition of a disciple becoming an apostle or "sent one." One of Jesus' most paramount purposes was to embody and exemplify God's will on earth as it is in heaven. And now, with it being Jesus' time to leave, it was the privilege of the apostles to continue and advance. But it wasn't like they could just get started and do whatever they wanted next. Jesus gives them instruction.
2. It was on the 40th day after Easter that Jesus went up to the Mount of Olives with his disciples and ascended to heaven before their eyes. This means for 40 days following his resurrection and return to reveal himself to his disciples, Jesus spends time with them. For 40 days, they received the peace of Christ. I am sure they were in utter amazement at what they were witnessing. During this time Jesus continues to teach and help

empower them to witness. But it wasn't just a running of the bulls in which the gates fly open and we see what happens. Jesus was deliberate in his charge for them to wait. Wait for what? Wait for the power of the Holy Spirit to come upon them before they 'GO'. Jesus urges them to wait before acting or reacting on their own power, for the power to go on was coming and it was coming through the promise of God.

This is recorded in Luke 24 when Jesus says, "You are witnesses of these things. And 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." Jesus continues to say, "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 end of the earth."

When we have a tendency to just move on to the next thing, suggesting "Oh well, that is that, now what?", Jesus is encouraging patience. Why? Because waiting on the Holy Spirit to come and empower will be the key to success. What Jesus is offering to them is the fact that God is not done, and God has not abandoned you or forsaken you. Yes, it was awfully devastating to witness the death of Jesus on the cross, and it is hard to believe you will be able to fulfill the tasks laid out before you now as Jesus ascends to heaven, but this is still not the end of God's work. There is still more God is doing and Jesus tells them, "Wait!" Wait for God to come and wait for God to direct. To do this would require great boldness and faith. We are to put our faith in God, not rush into trying to do things on our own, and trust in the power of God to be the power we need to go on.

3. Now, with the charge to wait and the time in which the Holy Spirit has descended upon them has come, we can consider that the ascension of Jesus initiates a new era when Jesus is no longer present in the flesh, and when the community looks outward and begins adding to its numbers. Note I didn't say the community shuttered in fear and looked inward. The ascension of Jesus turned the focus of the disciples upward and outward. Upward to God's glory- "gazing up toward heaven"- and outward in shared vocation- As noted in the text, "Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" suggests the need to move ahead in the practice of ministry (not on from God but on in the power of God through the Holy Spirit).

The charge to focus upward and outward has real time reflection. While we sing of Christ's lordship over all creation, how often have we acted as though he is powerless in the face of today's events? How can we live with more confidence in his presence today and with more hope for life with him forever?

To answer these questions, I would like to consider the Church in three possible scenarios.

What descriptor best expresses our congregation's understanding of the kingdom? Perhaps our congregation is looking for the kingdom of survival. "We are a small congregation that desperately needs young families to join our gray-haired church so that we will survive." Or perhaps our congregation is anticipating the kingdom of activity. "With more than thirty opportunities a week for people to come and serve, we are busier than ever!" Or perhaps our congregation is seeking the kingdom of consumption, constantly striving to provide bigger, better, and more entertaining worship services, so that those who come on Sundays will feel good about the pastor's performance. When we ask Jesus when God will restore the kingdom to the good old days- to the way we think church ought to be, or to the way that best satiates us- Jesus points not to the future but to the power of the Holy Spirit in the present.

The ascension of Jesus moves us from passively waiting for Jesus to come and fix things in the end times to actively participating in the work of the Holy Spirit now. The Holy Spirit is the power we need to go on, as this congregation, as the Church, as the world, and of course, as individuals.

Jesus was more than a dynamic preacher or brilliant teacher or religious iconoclast. Jesus ascended to the Father and now reigns with God. Jesus is Lord of heaven and earth. This is not something to simply move past. It is something to focus on so we can discover and know and tap into the power to go on.

The Afters sing in their song *I Will Fear No More...*

*No power can come against me... 'Cause You have overcome
No darkness can overwhelm me... 'Cause You've already won
You're my courage when I worry in the dead of night
You're my strength 'cause I'm not strong enough to win this fight
You are greater than the battle raging in my mind
I will trust You, Lord
I will fear no more.*

I don't know about you, but after the events of this week, I needed the reminder of the Holy Spirit as a power of courage, strength, and glory. God does provide. God will provide.