

Sermon: Using the Power We've Been Given

Year C, Feast of the Ascension

[Acts 1:1-11](#); [Psalm 47](#); [Ephesians 1:15-23](#); [Luke 24:44-53](#)

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In today's readings, we get a Hollywood moment. The clouds part, and Charlton Heston, I mean Jesus Christ, becomes luminous, and he floats up to heaven like a balloon someone hasn't tied around their wrist tightly enough. It's a very visual moment. And it lets us modern people have a little smirk at how little the Biblical people knew. We know that Jesus isn't up on a cloud somewhere with a harp. We've been up in the clouds and there's no one to see. We've been in *space* and there's no one to see. With such a strong visual, it's easy to miss the point, which is something the ancients might understand better than we do.

I could lay out some logical arguments for you. If Jesus could come back from the dead, and be with his disciples, eating and sleeping and teaching, then clearly the regular rules are no longer in place. So it makes sense that there is some clear boundary line to mark the end of his time on earth.¹ Remember at the beginning of Lent, I mentioned that in the Bible, sometimes 40 means one more than 39, one less than 41. And sometimes it means for a long time. Well sometimes it means for a time out of time. Forty days isn't a lunar month, it isn't a solar month, it's some funny slice that doesn't fit into any human scale of time.² So that tells us that the boundary is also a mystical, spiritual one as well.

So perhaps we look at the Ascension as some event that marked the end of Jesus' bodily presence here on earth. That's important to us humans, since even with that, we're only too willing to follow people promising miracles. Furthermore, if we look at Jesus as the first born of the dead, then we follow him through death to life eternal and then on to glory, joined with God forever. So it makes sense that the early church would include an account of that final transition.

But what we may not see, since our lives are so full of special effects, (send a text, send a text with a crying with laughter emoji, send a text with an emoji and a minion gif, send a text with an emoji and a gif and with confetti) what we may not see, is what Jesus is doing. Even though he told us exactly what he was doing. Even though we watch him do it.

Jesus is making space for us to come into our power.³ The entire length of time from that first Pentecost, when the Spirit came into the world, and the Second Coming, is our time. It's time for us to use the power we've been given.

Well, hooray. In times of upheaval, there are always struggles for power. The more we disagree about what kind of society we want, the more intense, and more confusing, the struggle for power becomes. Without power, we can't change the present, and frankly, no one is content with the way things are. We feel like we're being hijacked to a destination we don't want and

¹ William Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976: 13.

² Gail Ramshaw, 'Living by the Word: Reflections on the Lectionary [May 5, 2016]', *The Christian Century*, vol. 133, no. 9 (2016): 18.

³ David S. Cunningham, "Ascension of the Lord, Theological Perspective, Luke 24:44-53" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 2*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008], 522.

we need power to change course.⁴ Even better, power isn't promised to everyone. Just to Jesus' disciples.⁵ Excellent choice. Just what we wanted to hear. We're awesome. The world will now run much better. Isn't that what Jesus' disciples were asking? "*Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?*" (Acts 1:6)

Jesus, being Jesus, says, "no". He always vetoes the best ideas. He says instead, "*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.*" (Acts 1:7-8). We see what he's doing there. Start small, at home, in Jerusalem, and then widen the circle of your influence until it encompasses all the earth.⁶

But what is the power? It's the power of witness. The witness of the first disciples was two-fold.⁷ They had seen Jesus with their own eyes. So they were sent out to Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria, to tell everyone about Jesus Christ. And they had the power of someone who had actually seen the events they were describing with their own eyes.

But more than that, they had the power to look through Jesus' eyes at a person and see the whole person. Jesus didn't arrive on this earth with a seven point plan to make sinners more spiritual or Pharisees more secular.⁸ There wasn't a one-size-fits all plan of repentance and salvation. Jesus went one by one: the cripples were healed, the people burdened with demons were liberated, the pious confronted with the total demand of the Kingdom.⁹ Whatever each person was and whatever stood between them and a life returned to God was what Jesus addressed.¹⁰ And it worked because Jesus' words and deeds were in synch.

Yes, we are to witness to the life of Jesus Christ. Yes, we are to share with others the truth about loving our neighbors and loving God. Here in Brookline, and in Nashua and even in godless Massachusetts and to the ends of the earth. But we are also empowered to share the witness of Jesus Christ. Of how each life can be transformed by being seen with love and compassion and the conviction of Jesus Christ that all are called to God.

I know this is New Hampshire, and if it would ever stop raining, the lawn signs would begin popping up in earnest. We have this model of witnessing what we believe in, probably derived from cable TV, which says that we witness our beliefs most faithfully when we listen to someone else only long enough to catch a word or two before shouting over them. We witness our beliefs by mocking the beliefs of others. We insist that the misfounded beliefs of others are based on an ignorance of basic facts and once they stopped being such uneducated morons and listened to us, they too would believe as we do. I don't know if the model of witness that Jesus offered would work in that setting. I'm not sure it's ever been tried. But I'm pretty sure that Jesus wasn't very

⁴ Leander E. Keck, "Listening To and Listening For: from Text to Sermon (Acts 1:8)." *Interpretation* 27, no. 2 (1973):196.

⁵ Keck, 196.

⁶ G. H. C. Macgregor, "The Acts of the Apostles: Exegesis," vol. 9 in *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Bible in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1954), 29.

⁷ Keck, 193.

⁸ Keck, 198.

⁹ Keck, 198.

¹⁰ Keck, 198.

interested in using power in that setting. I think that's why he dismissed the idea that we could control when the kingdom of God arrived.

On Memorial Day, after the lovely ceremony on the Town Hall steps, I was saying "hello" to folks who were there. As I walked through the crowd in my robe and stole, in my "uniform" as someone called it, which tickled me, an older man put his hand on my arm. He was in his 80s or 90s. He was sweet and gentle and he said, "I have a tough time getting used to the idea of women as ministers." Now, I know there are plenty of people who think that. Although, they don't usually say it to me. So I was kind of at a loss for words. I think I said something about hoping that I would do a good job and not get in God's way.

I've thought about it all week, trying to figure out what I should have said. Gradually I've come to realize that I didn't need to share my viewpoint more clearly or more emphatically. God has called me to be a minister and I know that to be the truth all the way to my bones. Instead I should have accepted the old man's invitation to witness *his* story. Normally when folks don't think women should be ministers, they don't say anything. He sought me out. He invited me into dialogue. I'm not kicking myself or anything, but I realized that when I think about witness, it has to be more the way Jesus did it, and less about the way I want to talk about it.

So as we go out into this coming week, into the all church meeting that will follow this service, think about the power you have been given. The power to speak of what Jesus had done in your life. And the power to see people through Jesus' eyes, to love them enough to want to witness their stories, their triumphs, their confusions. Because that will change the world. And that will let us ascend to heaven with him. Let us pray, using prayer #265 in the hymnal.