

Grace Episcopal Church, Galena IL
May 17, 2015 – Ascension Sunday
Sermon by Rev. Gloria Hopewell, D.Min.

Text: Acts 1: 1-11, Luke 24: 44-53

How many of you have been on a hot air balloon ride? I've had just one, floating just after sunrise over Cappadocia--above ancient houses and chapels carved from volcanic rock and the underground warren of homes that were refuges and hiding places for Christians in the times before their religion became accepted and established.

A hot air balloon ride with its thrust of flame-heated air is nothing at all like Jesus' ascension—but those moments of sheer silence as the wind catches and lifts the balloon is the very closest thing I can imagine to what Luke describes as Jesus' final departure from the world.

These two brief stories we've heard this morning, found only in Luke's writings—in his Gospel and Acts—are poetic accounts. Luke probably never intended for these to be read as literal descriptions of Jesus' earthly farewell. The two stories are not identical—they differ in some details, like the location of the ascension and when it took place. In Luke, it is on Easter night in Bethany a distance from Jerusalem. In Acts, it is 40 days later and is from Olivet, outside the city.

What is more significant than these details, though, is the placement of the stories. They form a sort of hinge signifying both an end and a beginning. The very last words in the Gospel tell us that the time of Jesus as God's incarnation to the world is over. Jesus will no longer be present in bodily, human form. And then, the first words of Acts heralds a new era, the era of the church. It is now time for the ministry of those who have been with him, prepared by him, blessed by him to carry on what he began. They will soon be empowered by the Holy Spirit and fan out through the world—and through the centuries to the end of time.

The words and symbols in these stories have lent themselves to countless works of art that render deep truths that we can't explain with our limited language. In paintings, or in our own church--stained glass, a common theme for the Ascension is as the Renaissance artists portrayed it—Jesus, in flowing robes, suspended in the sky, a hand stretched out in blessing, as the disciples gazed skyward watching as he floats away from them.

And symbols familiar to both Jesus' and Luke's audiences fairly shout out their significance. First, there is the cloud. There are many clouds in the Bible, most signaling a

theophany or encounter with God. We remember Moses going up Mt. Sinai to receive the Commandments. He had to enter the cloud that covered the mountain. Then, he and the Israelites were accompanied by clouds throughout their journey to the promised land—a pillar of cloud by day, the cloud of fire by night. The cloud that settled over the tabernacle when it was time to rest and lifted up when it was time to move on.

Key moments in Jesus' own ministry were marked by God's voice coming out of the cloud—his baptism and his transfiguration.

Then, there is the 40 days between the Resurrection and the Ascension. The number 40 signified a lengthy time of preparation or of completion. We remember that Noah and his family were in the midst of a flood for 40 days and 40 nights before the waters receded and they began a new life. Moses and the Israelites wandered for 40 years in the wilderness being prepared for the entering the Promised Land. And, Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness after his baptism being tested and readied for his ministry.

The Ascension itself was symbolic—other key figures in the history of the faith had unusual ends—Elijah who was taken up in a whirlwind, now Jesus, carried away by a cloud.

A rather odd but compelling work of art is Dürer's 16th century woodcut seen from the perspective of those on the ground looking up at the ascending Jesus. What you see is the bottom part of the cloud, with Jesus' legs and feet dangling. The rest of him is already out of sight. But what draws my attention is what appears to be a rock from which Jesus launched. The disciples are gathered around it, standing or kneeling and, of course, gazing skyward. On top of the rock is a pair of very clear footprints. I don't know if the artist intended this, but for me this provides the balance of Jesus' human and divine nature. After all, ghosts or spirits do not have footprints. I am imagining that Jesus' footprints were all over his earthly ministry and, if they can be traced, they provide a roadmap to all who wish to follow in his footsteps—to all: the first disciples, those who became the early church, each of us.

How, after all, did the disciples know what they were to do? In the years that they followed him through Galilee and Jerusalem and beyond, he gave them instruction and the opportunity to be apprentices in teaching and healing. He provided an example of how to live—how to be in relationship to God, how to wait, how to pray together, how to love. And then he promised them the Holy Spirit and blessed them.

If we read carefully, we find the footprints everywhere. They are in the teachings, the parables and the sayings. They are in the table fellowship where Jesus stepped outside the rules by sitting with the outsiders. They are in the healings but especially in restoring the people to community, including even those who had been cast out. They are in the

marketplace and the Temple courts—challenging those who were not being true to God’s purpose—challenging from within the tradition, not intending to replace it but to restore it according to what God hoped for humanity. They are found in feeding the poor, clothing the naked, and bringing justice and hope to God’s creation.

These footprints remain for us today in traditions handed down through the church—the Creeds, our worship and sacraments. They remain for us in theology—in our God-given human reason. But most of all, they remain here in the Gospels and the book of Acts, in Paul’s letters. And we, as the church, as individuals, are meant to be disciples, to follow in Jesus’ footsteps, to track his footprints. Jesus last instruction to the disciples—and to us—was this, “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

The world has turned, of course—over and over again since the first century after Christ. And the mission has not always moved forward in a straight line or in the life-giving waves surging outward in ever widening circles. In fact, sometimes it is hard to see the signs of the Kingdom at all.

It is time—past time, really—to look again for those footprints. To interpret them, to understand them, to discern what they mean for *this* time, for *this* place. And to bear witness, just as the apostles did, to persist in the mission of the church.

Bear witness. Now, that is a scary thought. We shy away from talking about things of great significance in our lives. Things like our faith. And yet, as I noted in this week’s “ramblings,” 94% of those who answered the CAT Survey agreed with the statement, “being part of this church community has given new meaning to my life.” 94%. That is 68 people. And even if we subtract those who just “tend to agree,” keeping just the “agree” or “strongly agree” responses, it is still more than 75%! I think that is amazing.

What stories there are to share—right here at Grace. Imagine telling others. I don’t mean trying to convert others to one “right” way of believing. Imposing our way upon them. But there are people who are longing for connections and meaning in this complicated world. People who only know church as rigid and judgmental, or closed and unwelcoming.

If we believe at all in the message of Christ—in the restoration and salvation of God’s people, in the church’s role in the coming of God’s Kingdom, then, it is urgent and the time is NOW. The men in white asked the disciples why they continued to stand and look up toward heaven, toward Jesus as he returns to God. Why do we continue to gaze—taking in the beauty of this place, the prayers, the communion and then just keep them for ourselves?

Jesus has ascended and is no longer leaving physical footprints on the earth, yet he remains present to us and has given us the Holy Spirit to empower us as witnesses. The reins have been turned over to us. God is depending on us. It must be so. For otherwise, how will the Kingdom come to its fullness?

Amen.