

SERMON SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER (ASCENSION)

“The Promise” based on John 17:1-11 and Acts 1:1-11

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When I was little, I remember being so excited whenever my family and I were going on a trip that included an airplane ride. Little Nehemia loved the idea of flying and see clouds from close distance. But more than that, I think I used to believed that flying meant I was getting closer to heaven.

As a child who faithfully went to Sunday school every week, I heard many stories about God, Jesus, and heaven. And whenever my Sunday school teachers talked about heaven, they often pointed upward—to the ceiling, to the sky. So, in my imagination, heaven was literally located somewhere above the clouds. A place “up there.” A destination somewhere above the clouds where God lives.

And the understanding of heaven literally located up in the sky perhaps inspired by the story we read today in Acts chapter 1.

“...he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going...”

— *Acts 1:9-10*

Here, Luke, who was believed as the writer of Acts, describes Jesus ascending upward into the sky. Scholars who study Gospel of Luke and book of Acts remind us that in Luke’s worldview, “up” symbolized God’s realm, God’s authority, and God’s presence. And it also fits with the ancient imagination, that heaven was above and the earth is below.

But in our world today, after technology become more advance, satellites and astronauts were sent to the space, and we can even see pictures of Earth from space, and we can see what is beyond the clouds, we may not think of heaven as a physical location literally above the clouds anymore. However, I will say that the metaphor still matters.

When it said Jesus ascends to the Father. It means that Jesus returns to glory. After Jesus fulfill his mission in this very earth we are living in today, He is exalted to the right hand of God, which

means the place of honor, authority, and kingship. Ascend here not only about moving physically, but the change of identity and fulfilment of promise. Jesus ascended to complete what He had started. And one day, Christ will come again to meet us so we can be together with Him eternally.

But interestingly, among all miracles and events in Jesus' life, the Ascension is often overlooked. Christmas receives beautiful lights and songs and big celebrations. Easter fills churches with overflowing crowds, special music, etc. But, Ascension day often passes quietly, almost unnoticed.

In Indonesia, Ascension Day is actually a public holiday. Since it is 40 days after Easter, it always falls on a Thursday, which means many people can enjoy a long weekend. In theory, it's a public holiday so it enables Christians to attend worship services. But in reality, many people use the holiday to either travel, rest, or simply sleep in. And Churches often end up quieter than usual. And maybe that reflects how we sometimes think about the Ascension. Not too important and just as a kind of epilogue to Easter.

However, for Luke, the story of the Ascension was so significant that he tells it twice: first at the end of his Gospel, and then again at the beginning of Acts as we read today.

Ascension happened 40 days after Easter. The number forty appears frequently throughout Scripture and carries deep symbolic meaning. While it can refer to a literal period of time, it often represents seasons of testing, struggle, preparation, and transformation. We see this in the story of Noah, when rain fell for forty days and forty nights. We also see it in the story where Moses and the Israelites fled Egypt, they spent forty years in the wilderness before entering the Promised Land. Also later in the gospel, Jesus himself fasted and was tempted in the wilderness for forty days. In each case, the number forty points to a time of challenge, waiting, discernment, and dependence on God.

So, when Acts tells us that forty days passed between the Resurrection and the Ascension, perhaps Luke is inviting us to see this not simply as a timeline, but as a meaningful season of transition. 2000 years ago, those 40 days was time when the disciples were learning to understand the risen Christ, preparing for what was to come, and being shaped for the mission ahead.

Also, to put ascension 40 days after resurrection means that Ascension is not a minor episode. Some theologians even said:

“Easter is incomplete, Pentecost is impeded, and the Second Coming is impossible without the Ascension.”

The Ascension matters deeply because it tells us something essential about Jesus, His identity, and about the church. The Ascension is the declaration that the crucified and risen Jesus now reigns. The one who suffered rejection, violence, and death is now Lord over all creation. And Luke wants us to know this event truly happened. He tells us the disciples saw it “before their very eyes.” This was not merely symbolic language or a private spiritual experience. Just like the Resurrection, there were witnesses. Something real and transformative happened.

But the question for us today is:

What does the Ascension mean for us now?

To reflect deeper on that question, I think we should read what Jesus said before he was ascending. Before He leaves, Jesus gives the disciples a promise and a mission.

“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.”

Notice this carefully. Jesus promises them His Spirit that will enable them to go into the world.

As the disciples are literally standing there, looking upward, watching Jesus disappear into the clouds, suddenly two men in white robes appear and ask: *“Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?”*

And perhaps, that question still speaks to the church today.

Why are you frozen? Why are you waiting? Why are you staring into the distance while the world around you aches with suffering?

Friends in Christ, sometimes Christians become so focused on “going to heaven” that we forget the mission Jesus gave us on earth. Sometimes faith becomes only about personal salvation and comfort. But here, Jesus calls us to participate in God’s work here and now.

Thankfully, Jesus knows this is not an easy work. He does not simply command the disciples to go. He promises: *“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.”* And this is the same power that raised Christ from the dead. The same power revealed in the Resurrection and Ascension. That power is now shared with ordinary people.

Friends, when Jesus ascended, it does not mean Jesus abandoned the world. It means Jesus entrusts the world to Spirit-filled disciples. In Matthew’s version of the ascension Jesus’ final words are, *“And remember, I am with you always to the end of the age.”*

Jesus is stating that no matter how far, or how high up, or how great the distance, they will be connected to Him through the Spirit. And that God does not watch from a distance but is ever present. Even though we will celebrate Pentecost, the day where The Holy Spirit came down to disciples, next week, we all today actually has received this Spirit when we welcomed Jesus into your hearts and proclaim Him as our Lord and Saviour. His Spirit is indwelling within us even if we don’t feel like it is.

And that Spirit is not only sitting and doing nothing, that Spirit empowers us to continue the mission of Jesus. To heal the sick, to feed the hungry. To welcome the stranger, to fight injustice. To seek peace and proclaim hope. To love our neighbors and even strangers. To forgive and reconcile. And to bear witness to the kingdom of God.

Church exists not merely to only admire Jesus, but to continue His work in the world. And honestly, that can feel overwhelming. Because when we look around today, the world feels deeply broken. Wars continue. People go hungry. Families are divided. Loneliness grows. Many are exhausted, anxious, and afraid.

And most times, we feel powerless in the face of all of it.

But remember that in the book of Acts, Luke reminds us that the church began with a small and frightened group of disciples who were also feels uncertain. They did not have political power. They did not have wealth. They may not even have fully understood what was happening. After all, forty days is not a long time to fully grasp the meaning of Jesus' resurrection and ascension.

But they had the promise of Christ. And through these disciples, all are ordinary people, the gospel spread throughout the world. It is amazing to see how, through the power of the Spirit, the church has fed millions through missions, congregations, and organizations. The church has built hospitals and cared for the dying. The church has translated Scripture into countless languages, helping people in every part of the world hear the good news.

And this is not because Christians are extraordinary people, but because the Holy Spirit continues Christ's work through ordinary people. And that means we are part of the story too. Christ is risen and reigning. The kingdom of God is already breaking into the world, and we are invited to participate in it.

As written in our reading today, the disciples are told to be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. What does it mean you might ask.

Jerusalem is local. It was home for the disciples. And for us, it means we are invited to witness to the people nearest to us, both geographically and relationally. Have we shared how great our God is with those closest to us? Perhaps neighbors or family members? Or are we sometimes too shy or hesitant for different reasons?

When I was in Vancouver, there was a woman in one church I served who I know boldly shared that she was a Christian and regularly invited people to church—bank tellers, , people who interested in learning real estate from her, parents of her daughter's friends, restaurant servers, her siblings who are not believer, and probably many others only God knows about. And perhaps that is exactly what God invites us to do today: to be witnesses in our Jerusalem, shamelessly.

Then, Judea and Samaria. For the disciples, Judea was the surrounding community. Similar with Samaria, yet Samaria carried a deeper challenge because Samaritans were seen as outsiders and enemies by many Jews living in Jerusalem. In other words, here Jesus calls the disciples not only to

love and witness to people like themselves, but also people they struggle to understand—people they may dislike, and who may dislike them in return. People who they considered unclean because their customs and practices were different.

And the question for us today is: who are the Judean and Samaritans in our lives? Are we able to witness Christ's love, grace, and mercy even to those people?

And then Jesus says: *"To the ends of the earth."*

The mission Jesus gives keeps expanding outward. This part is especially close to my heart because before I accepted the call to serve here in this country, thousands of miles away from home and family, I remember asking my parents for permission. My dad responded by quoting this very verse. Jokingly, he said there was no way I could ever reach Antarctica or Arctic—which for him was literally the end of the earth—so Canada already counted as the ends of the earth. He said he could not not in support of this calling because this was exactly what Jesus had commissioned his followers to do: to share the gospel to the ends of the earth.

And for each of you, this does not necessarily mean Jesus is asking you to move far away from home as I did. But it does mean we are all called to be witnesses wherever we are, so that our way of life can influence people who are not even live in this region. There are plenty of example of saints and sisters in different part of the world who are work and serves locally but end up recognized by many people because of their amazing works that started from small.

And witnessing is not only about spreading words or preaching from pulpit. It is about how we live. Sometimes the most powerful testimony is not a sermon. It is compassion, generosity, and courage. A powerful testimony is choosing love when hatred would be easier. It is standing beside those who suffer and refusing to give up hope.

Friends in Christ, at first glance, the Ascension feels like absence. Jesus leaves. The disciples can no longer physically see him. But paradoxically, through the Ascension, Jesus becomes even more present. Before the Ascension, Jesus was physically limited by humanity. He could only be in one place at one time. He walked roads, entered houses, and sat beside particular people.

But through the Holy Spirit, Christ is now present everywhere. Wherever people gather in his name, Christ is there. Wherever you call upon his name—in your bedroom when you feel alone, or around the dining table as you share a meal with loved ones—Christ is there.

And because Jesus is no longer physically visible to our human eyes, it takes faith to believe this. Faith that trusting in the presence of God even when we cannot fully comprehend it. Faith means doing what we can within our limitations and trusting God to take care of the rest. That is why, after Jesus ascends, the disciples do not remain standing there staring upward forever. Eventually, they return together to Jerusalem. They pray. They remain united. They prepare themselves for the coming of the Holy Spirit.

And perhaps that is also a word for the church today, because we live in an in-between time. Yes, Christ has ascended. The Spirit has come. But the world is still waiting for the fullness of God's kingdom. So, the invitation for us today is to wait with hope, to pray with expectation, and to witness with love.

Instead of thinking like seven-year-old Nehemia, who thought riding on an airplane meant getting closer to heaven physically, maybe the better question is: *“How can I bear witness to Christ here on earth?” How can I embody hope, reflect mercy? And how can I participate in God's healing work here and today?*

May Christ enable us to see every person as beloved by God. May God the Father help us to see every act of compassion as participation in God's kingdom. And may the Holy Spirit guide us to see ourselves as people sent by Christ into the world. So we can go into the world as witnesses of the risen and ascended Lord—in Jerusalem, Stamford or Niagara Falls; in Judea, the Niagara Region, Ontario; in Samaria, whoever the Samaritan may be for you today; and to the ends of the earth.

Amen.