

May 24, 2020 – Ascension Sunday

What is Ascension?

This is a special Sunday for the church, called Ascension Sunday. For forty days, we have been celebrating with joyful hearts the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, his bursting from the tomb and his defeat of the power of sin and death. During that time, Jesus appeared to his disciples many times and told them about the kingdom of God. Thursday, May 21st marked the end of those forty days. Today we recall how Jesus left this earth and returned to God the Father, by ascending into heaven, using the first-person account in the Book of Acts.

Acts is a continuation of the Gospel of Luke, written by the same person, for the same person. The Ascension of Jesus into heaven, which Luke describes, is like a turning point; the church doesn't really begin until Pentecost, eleven days after Jesus ascended. So this is the moment before something happens, like the breath you take before diving into the lake, or your golf club at apex of your swing, or your hand on a door, about to push it open...the time between Ascension and Pentecost is an eleven days full of potential and possibility, anxiety and fear. Let's read Luke's account of what the disciples experienced from Acts 1:1-9.

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

Then they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

Scripture Reading: Ruth 1:1-22

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. The man's name was Elimelek, his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.

Now Elimelek, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.

When Naomi heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.

Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the Lord show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband." Then she kissed them goodbye and they wept aloud and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people." But Naomi said, "Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me—even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons— would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord's hand has turned against me!" At this they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her.

"Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her." But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me." When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, "Can this be Naomi?"

"Don't call me Naomi," she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me."

So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.

Message: Famine and Faith

We meet Naomi at a moment of deep personal loss.

Her sons have died.

And this loss is only the most recent in a life filled with disappointments;

things would go well, for a while,

and then it'd all go wrong.

For years, the fields in Naomi's homeland Israel had been empty,
with little promise of bearing crops.

So she and her husband and young sons

had packed up and moved to a foreign land, Moab.

Naomi's husband died,

but Moab was nonetheless kind

in providing wives for her sons, Orpah and Ruth.

But with the death of all the major providers in the family

and Orpah leaving them to go home,

Naomi and Ruth find themselves alone,

with little hope for survival.

Still burdened by grief, they make it to Naomi's home,

Bethlehem in Israel.

There, Naomi expresses the depth and burden of her grief:

don't call me Naomi anymore; call me bitter.

I went away full

but the Lord has brought me back empty.

Naomi was trapped,

in this endless cycle of joy and loss, and joy and loss.

She thought her story was coming to an end:

no more husbands or sons for her,

no hope for security and peace in her old age,

no future legacy of grandchildren and great-grandchildren,

no harvest of joy.

Only a bitter emptiness,

all her abundant fullness stripped away.

She didn't have it in her to re-plant and start again for herself,

and so even her homecoming, after so many years away,

was bittersweet...mostly bitter, really.

Losing Jesus again must have been bittersweet,

and mostly bitter,

for the disciples, too.

From the heady days of Jesus' growing ministry
to the horror of the Cross
and the joy of the resurrection,
the disciples had been living their own cycle of
joy and loss and joy.

For forty days, Jesus had been with them, like before,
maybe even better than before.
The disciples had begun to hope again that Jesus would establish a kingdom
right then and there,
overthrowing Roman oppression once and for all;
a kingdom in which life would be as Jesus had said:
just, loving, generous, equitable
and all those other wonderful qualities
and ways of living
that he'd taught them.
Surely now was the time.
But instead, Jesus offers some final confusing and mysterious words,
and then he is lost to them again, ascending into heaven.
Practically-speaking, it meant that Jesus would no longer
be with them every day.
They didn't know quite what a baptism of the Holy Spirit was
or what it would mean for them.
All they knew was that they'd gone
from having Jesus back and teaching
and leading them again,
to this second abrupt end
to his ministry.
Famine and loss again, it seemed.

Like Naomi, the disciples are left to wait,
hoping that the bitter will become sweet again.
But for both Naomi and the disciples,
God has already set a plan in motion
for their lives to be made full and abundant once more.

Did you know that, in the entire book of Ruth,
God doesn't directly do or say much of anything at all?
And yet, God is moving in Naomi's life,
unmentioned and unseen,

laying the groundwork for an abundant harvest.

Although Naomi feels like she has been sent home to Israel
empty of all that once made her life full,
God has not left her with nothing.
She has Ruth.
And through Ruth's courage, risk-taking and loyalty
– through Ruth's faithfulness –
God will act to provide abundantly for them both.

As for the disciples, their lives will be full soon enough,
although in a new and different way than they're used to.
True, Jesus won't be physically there with them,
to fling an arm over their shoulders or sit next to at dinner.
But Jesus didn't just float up into heaven
to retire or take a holiday.

Ascension means that Christ is now unbound,
unrestricted in how he is present with them.
Setting aside his physical form means that he is present in every place,
in every gathering, in every faithful Christian heart and life
across time and geography.

Through the disciples, Christ will begin the establishment of his kingdom,
acting through these faithful men and women
to build a Church that'll touch every corner of the world
for two thousand years and counting.
But...not yet.
All that comes after Pentecost,
after the promised baptism
and pouring out of the Holy Spirit.

Right now, like Naomi, the disciples are waiting,
conscious of their losses,
while God moves around them,
unmentioned and unseen,
transforming their bitter losses
into abundant fullness and joy.

We also experience these same seasons
of abundant harvest and of bitter famine,
cycles of joy and loss, fullness and emptiness.
Collectively, because of the pandemic,
we're all feeling the loss of what we had before,

but our personal lives move through
some bittersweet seasons, too.

When we're in a season of loss, a time of emptiness,
it's so easy to get stuck in the moment;
even looking back to a time of joy and abundance
is coloured by the loss of it in the present,
and we might, like Naomi, find ourselves feeling empty.

Quite soon, things will begin to happen in Naomi's life
and she will begin to look ahead,
to plan and dream and hope for the future again.
But those good things are not going to happen
because of coincidence or luck...
...it's God, faithful to his promises,
at work through Ruth's faithfulness.

The larger stories of Ruth and Naomi,
of the disciples and the early church,
show us that God is faithful to his promises.
One of the biggest ways God keeps those promises is through Jesus.
Ascension means that Jesus is present with us in every moment,
and that we, as faithful women and men,
can participate in his kingdom-building work
as he acts through us.
It's meaning and purpose,
and it's faith
that turning the page,
seeing where our stories go,
will yield us an abundant harvest,
even when we feel empty and lost right now.

When our lives are bittersweet with grief, loss, or emptiness,
it's faith that keeps us going;
faith that makes us willing to plant
and re-plant, again and again.
The constant and driving force of all our stories,
the thing that moves our stories along, is faith;
and not just our faith in God,
but God's faithfulness to us, too.

And that's really the take-home message
of Naomi and Ruth and of the disciples

at this moment in their stories.
It's tempting to skip ahead,
past the bad bits and get to the joy and the harvest...
...but there's no fast-forward for our own lives.

If we linger with them in this moment of loss and emptiness,
on the cusp of a new harvest,
there is a tremendous gift for us to keep,
for when we're in a season of loss and uncertainty ourselves.

God is faithful to the promises that he's made
about loving us, caring for us and providing for us.
God is always already moving;
unmentioned, perhaps, and unseen.
But he is moving,
laying the groundwork
for a new season of joy and abundance for us.
Thanks be to God.
Amen.