

Jesus empowers you to carry out his ministry
Sermon Preached at the Church of St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA
by the Rev. Tom Pumphrey, May 10, 2018
Feast of the Ascension,

Acts 1:1-11: In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "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." When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Luke 24:44-53: Jesus said to his disciples, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you--that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. 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."

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Today is the Feast of the Ascension. Forty days after Easter (and ten days before Pentecost), we celebrate Jesus' ascension to heaven which occurred forty days after his resurrection, and ten days before the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. This is one of the major feasts of the church, though always falling on a Thursday, it is less frequently celebrated. The day and the event is significant. After his resurrection, Jesus did not die again, as Lazarus did. Rather, Jesus ascended to heaven and he awaits the last day when he will return for us. His disciples saw Jesus rise upward into the clouds after saying farewell.

This is an unusual experience. This is not like space travel, by the way. Jesus is not hiding out on the moon somewhere. But Jesus has gone to the presence of God the Father. Visually, the disciples understand this best by watching him rise in this way. The Ascension marks an important moment in Jesus' ministry and in the lives of the disciples. Jesus empowers *them* to carry out his ministry.

Can you imagine how the disciples felt in that moment? They had been on a roller-coaster of experiences, excited about his entry into Jerusalem, overwhelmed by fear at his arrest, heartbroken at his crucifixion, amazed with joy at his resurrection. Now they are ready for the victory lap. "Is this the time that you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" they ask him. Instead of leading them to victory and glory among the nations, Jesus responds with a farewell, and he

leaves them. They will no longer have his physical presence with them. That ministry has been completed for the time being.

Jesus makes the situation even more intimidating for his disciples. Not only is Jesus leaving them, but he tells them “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” They are ready for him to take control, and instead, he leaves them and hands over the responsibility to them! “*You* will be my witnesses,” he says. Jesus calls them to carry out his ministry. This was dangerous work. No wonder they seemed speechless as they stood there watching him leave them.

So why is this a feast day? This is hard work that Jesus asks of his disciples. This is hard work that Jesus asks of us, for we are also his disciples, aren't we? However, Jesus leaving them is not the only part of the story. Indeed, Jesus' departure allows his presence and power to extend beyond one place in the world. A significant part of the Ascension is that this is preparation for the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Jesus promises them that he will send the Holy Spirit. Through the Holy Spirit, the presence of Jesus, the presence of God, will be with them. The Holy Spirit will empower them to carry out Jesus' ministry. Indeed, Jesus empowers us to carry out his ministry.

This may feel intimidating to you, perhaps as much as it may have sounded to the first disciples. Whether you are brand new to the faith, or an active church member, or a seasoned member of the clergy, we all feel a bit overwhelmed by God's call sometimes. In the face of the needs of the world, especially such a secular world, the idea of bearing witness to Jesus sounds intimidating. We feel ill equipped to tell our story, unsure of how to effectively convey our experience of God. We don't know how others will respond and we're not used to helping other people discover the joy of a life in Christ. We also know our own struggles and doubts. So we feel a little powerless. But our feelings deceive us.

Let me share an experience that a friend recently had. His brother has been diagnosed with late stage cancer. Though my friend devoted himself to our Lord as an adult, his brother has had little time or interest in God. My friend wondered about his brother, and he felt compelled to speak with him about embracing God's grace and forgiveness. When my friend visited his brother recently, he thought about how he might open a conversation with him about God. But before he could start that conversation, and while they were out at a park somewhere, a stranger came up to them and shared with them an evangelistic pamphlet about Jesus.

His brother wasn't interested. He turned down the pamphlet and spoke as if his attitude about God was not going to change. Then my friend offered a few comments about his own faith, and how he has been so much happier living a more spiritual life. That seemed the end of the conversation with his cynical brother. But later, at the end of the day, despite his earlier comments that seemed to push God away, his brother asked my friend to pray for him. My friend answered that he was praying for him already.

This is not one of those gutter-to-God stories. This isn't a flashy miracle—no resurrection or immediate healing. But this is an experience of the power of the Holy Spirit at work—the power of Christ's presence alive in the world through God the Holy Spirit. My friend didn't feel

particularly empowered. He felt intimidated and unskilled in sharing his faith. His brother's initial reaction was to push away talk of God.

But my friend was not alone and not powerless. The power of God was at work in him and through him. The Holy Spirit was at work way ahead of him too, preparing the stranger to come at just the right time, preparing his brother to hear what he had to say. The Holy Spirit was at work in my friend's words, percolating and growing inside his brother despite his first response. And the Holy Spirit will be at work even after this conversation, calling him to closer relationship with God.

My friend was, like the disciples, a witness to the resurrection—a witness to the grace of God in Jesus. He is no expert, just a disciple from the pews, leaning on God for direction, and willing to follow. Like the first disciples, Jesus empowered him to carry out his ministry. And because of the power of the Holy Spirit, his ministry is effective—just like yours!

Jesus empowers you to carry out his ministry too. You may feel untrained. You may be untrained (don't worry, the church can help you to grow as a disciple! Don't forget to get involved so that you can learn and grow—it is really exciting when you do!) Even if you have been trained, it is easy to feel unsure or unconfident. Remember what Jesus did for the disciples. Jesus empowers us to carry out his ministry. Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to strengthen us for just the work that God wants us to do. The Holy Spirit is already at work before us, and will continue long after us. But in that moment, we have the power to share God's grace with a world hungry for Good News.

At this feast of the Ascension, we stand without Jesus walking and teaching in our midst. But we still stand empowered by the Holy Spirit to see God at work in the world and in us and through us. Join in celebrating this feast—this great blessing of God for the world. Join in celebrating the privilege of sharing in that blessing. Jesus empowers you to carry out his ministry.