

Acts 1 Spectators or Witnesses?

Ascension Sunday is one of those somewhat obscure Christian observances. You would have to look long and hard, and high and low, to find an Ascension Day greeting card. Despite the dramatic nature of this occasion, card merchants have not seized upon it as way to increase their sales. A tongue in cheek commentary suggested merchants are missing a golden opportunity to market Ascension Day balloons saying "Follow Christ into the clouds." It is the day on the church calendar when the ascension of Christ into heaven is celebrated. Because Jesus is traditionally felt to have remained with the disciples for forty days after his resurrection, this is not an observance which falls on a Sunday which increases the tendency to overlook it. That Christ ascended is a fundamental part of our understanding of events that surrounded the resurrection. In fact, during the farewell discourse of John's gospel, before the crucifixion, Jesus very patiently tells his disciples that he is going to go to the Father. They are told they are not joining him at this time, but he will prepare a place for them in the Father's presence. And they will receive a power from on high after he has gone which will be their guide and which will empower them to do the work he has gathered them to continue. Nothing has gone according to their expectations. They did not envision the cross or the resurrection, so after the risen Lord has spent time with them, the ascension also was not what they expected. We accept that Christ ascended into that intimate presence with the Father, but what is often hard for us to envision is this actual ascension, especially as described in Scripture. According to the description in the book of Act from which I read this morning, "he was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight." The disciples' understanding of the universe was very different from ours. For them heaven was literally a geographical location up in those clouds, just beyond their sight. It was very easy for them to visualize the ascension as a literal change in location where up was heaven. This is why in last week's passage they were so concerned about the lack of specific physical directions to that literal place. Today we are considering two passages describing the ascension from the same author—the passage from Luke's gospel is the concluding story of Jesus' physical life and mission with the disciples. During this period after his resurrection but before the ascension, Jesus continues to "open their minds to understand the scriptures." He also gives them a promise and a mission. The mission is "to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem." The promise is "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." Jesus then leads them out of the city to the Mount of Olives where the ascension will take place. Luke phrases it "while he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven." The account in Acts states that after giving them the mission and the promise, "as they were watching, he was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight." The first few verses of Acts explain this need for two accounts. "In the first book, Theophilos, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven." The second book which begins with the Ascension was the church's way dealing with a fundamental fact—the earliest disciples had experienced the bodily presence of the risen Lord, the one who was no longer under the claim of death. After a passage of time, this experience of the risen Lord as bodily present to them was lost. They accounted for his absence by saying that he had ascended into heaven. The ascension is Jesus' exodus from earth. Too often we are misled by

Luke's stated purpose to give an orderly account of the events. We think in terms of a historical account. Luke's purpose was not to present a history in the way that word is understood today—a factual accounting of an event. The phrase which clues us in on what he is about is found early in the gospel of Luke. In Luke 1:1-2 he writes about what he proposes: "Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, ²just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. The key being the phrase "events fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us". Luke is a person of faith who is recording what he has come to believe through those who witnessed to the message of Jesus. Luke is preaching, not reporting; he is sermonizing, not summarizing. His truth is not rooted in when or where, but in what it means and why it is important. Today we have the same circumstance. We believe in a risen Lord who is no longer physically present. The body of Jesus is not here any longer, except in us, except in the church as the body of Christ. So when thinking of the Ascension we need to be thinking about what it means to be the body of Christ here and now. Many see the church as just one more volunteer community organization, like a civic club or other non-profit organization which does good work. But those organizations are not the body of Christ. The church is Jesus among us. Its mission is to be consistent with Jesus' mission. Ascension Sunday reminds us that we are each, individually, a part of Christ's body. When we neglect our part in the mission of the church, we disable, we hinder the body of Christ. We are the arms and legs, the eyes and ears; we are the limbs and organs of Christ's present body. We are how the world comes to know Jesus. We are called to participate and continue in Christ's work. It is up to us to do it, with the help of the Holy Spirit. Those first disciples were told to go back to Jerusalem and wait a few days. There they would receive the power promised, a baptism of the Holy Spirit, from the Father.—we will celebrate this event in two weeks—when we observe Pentecost. As the church we already have the presence of the Holy Spirit with us. One last time the disciples pose an inappropriate question for Jesus. They asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" They are still looking for an end to the oppression found in the occupation of Israel by the Romans. Jesus says nothing about the Romans, but indicates that the time or periods when things are to occur are not to be known by them. And that includes us, despite the many who think they can figure it out. What Christ repeats is his mission for them—they are to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. On this note, Jesus departs from their sight. And do the disciples follow instructions? Not exactly. They stand there gazing up into the sky. They are too interested looking where the ascended Jesus has been to head off to fulfill his command. Again, we have two beings that suddenly appear and ask them "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come again in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." It seems they are saying, no need to keep looking there. Didn't you pay attention to what he just told you? He said, "Go", and here you are rooted on this spot, looking longingly for some further word from him. You don't need to wonder about when, that's not the right question to ask. You need to follow instructions and go, and do as he told you to do. It is amazing how many Christians spend vast amounts of time, inordinate amounts of energy, immoderate amounts of speculation, asking that question: When. We have been asked to be "his witnesses" to the world, not his calculators for his return. It seems throughout history, many would rather be speculators than

witnesses. It is a far safer, less demanding course to take. Speculators write books of calculations, hold seminars that attract thousands, rake in untold piles of loot, while prognosticating a certain time for Jesus' return. Witnesses, on the other hand, just witness to the truth of the gospel; the truth of justice for the whole world, the love of enemies, and the care for the marginalized and outcast. It is clear that the world actually needs far fewer speculators and far more witnesses. So let us be about being the body of Christ—his witnesses to the world. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.