

“You are witnesses”

Luke 24:44-53 (May 21, 2023)



On April 12th, 1961, a 27 year old air force pilot named Yuri Gagarin made history. He became the first human ever to go into space. His one hour and forty minute flight marked a triumph for the space program of the Soviet Union. He was a hero.



At the time, the officially atheist propaganda machine announced his words, “I went up to space, and I looked, but I didn’t encounter God.” They wanted to show that faith was mere superstition. “Look, we’ve gone to explore the heavens. And now we can say with confidence: Nothing was there. There is no God.”

As a result of this, I wonder ... How many people packed away their Bibles, never to read them again? Or stopped going to church? Or began to re-think the role of faith in the modern world. Over the years, as human knowledge has increased, the space we give to God has grown ever smaller. We have managed to push God further and further to the margins, imagining that one day, perhaps, we won’t need God at all.

That would make those old Soviets happy. But *real* science, not propaganda, has actually enlarged our sense of mystery and wonder. For every question answered, we’ve discovered a thousand more. The world is so much bigger than we imagined, there is so much we do not know!



On Ascension Sunday, we hear a story that makes us scratch our heads. It’s a strange one, isn’t it? Here we see Jesus, leaving this earthly existence, hands held out in blessing, rising up into the sky.

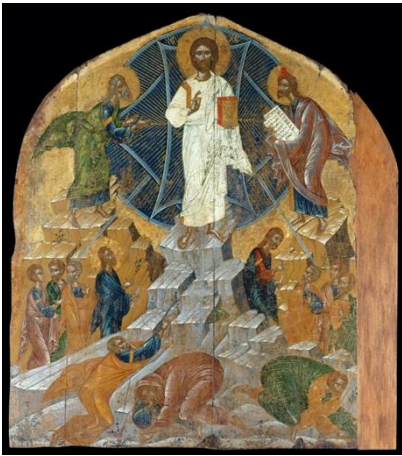


Didn’t Elijah do something similar? He was taken up by a whirlwind into heaven. (2 Kings 2:11) Separated from his successor by a chariot and horses of fire. What an amazing vision! But how do we account for it?

Does Jesus defy the laws of gravity as he levitates in the sky? Does he really go to live in outer space? Or is there something more involved in these occurrences? Could it be not so much a spatial re-location as a shift in Jesus’ reality? One that sees his time of earthly incarnation come to an end. Jesus returns to that eternal realm where it all began. Call it the realm of God.

A former professor of mine encourages us to think of the ascension more in terms of *time* than space. Jesus enters a realm that transcends earthly limits. A place of God’s *eternity*. A place of great glory – which we may catch a peek of, now and then.

The Kingdom of God comes to us, breaking into our earthly realm. And when it does it takes our breath away, reminding us that there is more, oh so much more! Jesus came to let us see a glimmer of God. Well, more than just a glimmer, truth be told!



Remember that moment on the mountain when his whole being was transfigured before three trembling disciples?

Remember how, wherever he went, he brought life and love to the earth – healing the sick, feeding the hungry, forgiving sinners and bringing us all back into right-relationship with our Creator? Talk about *new reality*! In Jesus we catch a little bit of heaven, here on earth.



In our reading today, as Jesus enters eternity, he leaves his disciples with some precious gifts. And those gifts are what I want to speak about. Two things in particular: A *vocation*. And the *power* to live it out.

First, a vocation. What is our purpose, our calling, our vocation here on earth? Jesus tells his disciples they are witnesses. But witnesses to what? Witnesses to the reign of God that has come to the world in Jesus.

Before Jesus ascends, he sits the disciples down and teaches them one more time, opening their minds to understand the scriptures: “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.”



Jesus gives his disciples a *story* to tell. And what a story it is! It’s a story that continues to inspire us, inform us, and change our lives. It’s the story of a loving God who gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

It’s a story of God taking on flesh and blood in this beaten-up old world. God becoming one with us in every imaginable way, in order to save us from our self-destructive sin and death, and lift us all to a new reality. Heaven’s life came down to earth, to raise our humanity to heaven.

See, I’m speaking in spatial terms again – up and down, down and up. What I mean is that Jesus came to reveal God’s glory. And draw us toward it, like moths to a light bulb beside your back door.

“You are witnesses,” says Jesus. You’ve heard the story. And now I’m giving you to the world so that others can hear it too.



So let me ask you: Where have you seen the glory of God? When have you encountered a fleeting moment of eternity? A glimpse of something that makes you gasp with joy, or send a shiver down your spine?

We’re not so well equipped to speak of these things in our modern world. That doesn’t mean we don’t experience them. When have you encountered the presence of God?



The other day Lindsay and I took our 14 month old granddaughter to the park. The day was warm and the sun was shining. Children from a nearby Daycare were riding on the swings.

Isla, who's learning how to walk and speak, is *so* curious about the world around her. She was having a lovely time. We all were. It was idyllic. It was a gift of God's grace.

Now you could write that off as a very *ordinary* human experience. It could happen to anyone. And so it could. But when we see it in the framework of faith it actually becomes something more. Beyond ordinary. Where have you encountered God?

We are witnesses to resurrection. Can we focus on that?



In his writing on evangelism, Pope Francis, has this to say:

“Christ’s resurrection is not an event of the past; it contains a vital power which has permeated this world. Where all seems to be dead, signs of the resurrection suddenly spring up. It is an irresistible force. Often it seems that God does not exist: all around us we see persistent injustice, evil, indifference and cruelty. ...



“But it is also true that in the midst of darkness something new always springs to life and sooner or later produces fruit. On razed land life breaks through, stubbornly yet invincibly. However dark things are, goodness always re-emerges and spreads. Each day in our world beauty is born anew, it rises transformed through the storms of history.”¹

There's a story we've been given as God's people. We are witnesses to God's resurrection life!



You know that we are always witnessing to *something*, whether we intend to or not. In our Bible study group a few days ago, somebody said, “There's no sense trying to hide who we are. Because others will always be able to read us like a book!”

Now that's a wee bit scary! Others can see through the *image* of ourselves we wish to project. The masks we wear, the façades we work so diligently to construct. We're not fooling anyone. People can see through those things to discover what's in our hearts. What do they find there? What is the real message of our lives?



Depiction of the Christian Holy Spirit as a dove, by Gian Lorenzo Bernini, in the apse of Saint Peter's Basilica, c. 1660. Photo by Dnalor 01.

You are witnesses, but witnesses to *what*?



And now we need to hear about that other gift that Jesus gives to his disciples. Not just a vocation, but also the *power* that enables us to live it out.

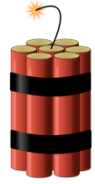
“Stay in the city,” says Jesus, “until you have been clothed with power from on high.” Clothed with an energy that is bound to change you for the good, reminding you of my presence, leading you further into my kingdom.

Life transforming “power from on high.”

¹ Pope Francis, The Joy of the Gospel: Evangelii Gaudium

Do you know the word Jesus used? It's *dýnamis*.

From which we get our word dynamite. It's an explosive force that has power to dismantle and disrupt, pulling down mountains, removing barriers. Radically altering the landscape of our lives.



Power from on *high*. The power Jesus speaks of is not destructive, but life-giving. It's the same power that surfed the waters of creation when our world began. The power of God's Spirit bringing life. And new creation.



The inventor of dynamite was Alfred Nobel, a Swedish chemist and engineer. He made a fortune on his invention. But he was later inspired to donate his fortune to a better cause.

There's a well known story about how this happened. In 1888 his brother Ludvig died. Some say an obituary was published that mistakenly condemned him for the invention of military explosives: "The merchant of death is dead," the headline read.



However it happened, Alfred determined not to let that be his legacy. So he arranged for the bulk of his estate to fund the Nobel Prizes, "recognizing those who work for the benefit of humankind," including a prize for peace.²

Dýnamis – the power of heaven. The power of God's Spirit that brings new life. Power that recognizes God's good gifts in the world, enhancing the lives of God's people.

Photograph: Jonathunder.
Medal engraver: Erik
Lindberg (1873-1966)

"Stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."



I guess you've heard we have a newly crowned monarch. It was one week ago that many celebrated the coronation of King Charles. But here, on Ascension Sunday, we celebrate a *different* kind of Coronation.

When Jesus ascends to heaven it's to take his place at the Right Hand of his heavenly Father. Which means as God's anointed ruler.

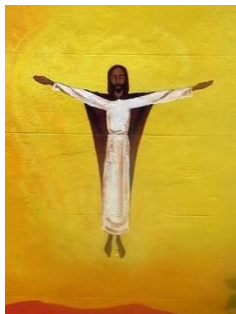
Think back to that passage of scripture we used as our Call to Worship. Pull it out and have a look, if you like. It tells the story of Jesus.

First his descent: a *downward* movement, to become as one of us. "He emptied himself ... becoming obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross."

And then it speaks of an *upward* movement, an ascent. "Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend ... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."



² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred_Nobel, Accessed May 18, 2023.



When Jesus *ascends* into heaven, we think in spatial terms. But what it really means is that Jesus is ascending to his throne.

One of the early creeds of the church puts it like this: “the third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into Heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God, the Father almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the living and the dead.”³

The Ascension is not about Jesus going away, or leaving us. It’s about Jesus returning to his rightful place of just rule and life-giving power.

And here’s the implication of that. No longer will Jesus be limited by place and time: a man who lived far away, more than two thousand years ago. As Jesus ascends to the Realm of God, he is available to *everyone, everywhere, all the time*.

He is not just a figure from the past. He is alive and present in our lives, in our world, in this time and in this place. He sends his Spirit, he reveals his presence, he gives us life – eternal life.



I began by telling you the story of that Russian Cosmonaut and his journey into space. The Communist government used that event to prove there was no God.

Remember the quote they put in the mouth of Yuri Gagarin? Well, as it turns out, Gagarin never actually said it. Gagarin was a member of the Russian Orthodox Church in a time when that was not a popular thing to be. Faith was part of who he was.⁴ Perhaps he *did* encounter God in his journey into space!

We are witnesses. We have a story. And we have power to live it out.

And I hope you do. The life of the world is depending on it. And Jesus is depending on you! We are given a vocation. And the power to live it. May it be so in your life this week. Amen.



³ The Apostles’ Creed.

⁴ https://www.beliefnet.com/columnists/on_the_front_lines_of_the_culture_wars/2011/04/yuri-gagarin-first-human-in-space-was-a-devout-christian-says-his-close-friend.html