

To Infinity and Beyond

Luke 24:49-53; Acts 1:1-3, 6-14

As many of you know

I had aspirations of being an astronaut.

Early on my aptitude for math  
made it apparent that NASA

would not be recruiting me anytime soon.

But even before taking a math EOG

there was another factor

that made me question my space career:

it was a fear of infinity.

Limitless space made me nervous.

The same fear made me apprehensive about heaven  
—what do you mean 3<sup>rd</sup> grade Sunday school teacher  
that heaven goes on forever and ever?

For a budding astronaut

the thought that I could be

attached to the space rocket

and accidentally become unclipped

and find myself I'd floating away **forever**

it gave me the heebie-jeebies.

Space is infinite they say.

Infinity is, by definition, endless, boundless.

And so, without any borders

or time stamps

of beginnings and endings

—I get, (maybe) we all get

a little nervous.

Remember Buzz Lightyear,

the toy space commander

in Disney's Toy Story movies?

Any 4-year-old boy can tell you,

his catch phrase, "to infinity and beyond!"

Where would we go

if it meant going to infinity and beyond?

I'd like to think about this

as a theological question instead of a math/science one

—because as already stated  
my aptitude for math  
can pretty much be described as *less than*.

You see this is the 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Eastertide  
and the last Sunday before Pentecost.  
What began liturgically  
back in February with Ash Wednesday,  
the beginning of Lent,  
through to April  
with the triumphal entry into Jerusalem,  
the redefining of a sacred meal in an upper room,  
and to an arrest, death on a cross  
and a glorious resurrection  
—all of that culminates really  
with next Sunday's celebration of Pentecost—  
the birth of the church.

But here we are,  
on the Sunday before.

This is Ascension Sunday.

Thursday, was the official day  
for the Feast of the Ascension  
and anything with the word *feast* in it  
makes me wish  
I was a little more orthodox  
even for just a day.

Ascension Sunday isn't to be  
overlooked or skipped  
—because it really is a lynchpin  
in getting us from the resurrection  
to Pentecost.

The lectionary reading  
has us start the Acts story with verse 6  
but without either looking back  
to Luke's gospel  
or stating with the first verse of Acts  
we miss the different parts  
of the ascension story.

So, let's hear Luke from his gospel  
and then first part of Acts:

<sup>45</sup>Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, <sup>46</sup>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, <sup>47</sup>and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. <sup>48</sup>You are witnesses of these things. <sup>49</sup>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."

<sup>50</sup>Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. <sup>51</sup>While he was blessing them; he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. <sup>52</sup>And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; <sup>53</sup>and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

<sup>1</sup>In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning <sup>2</sup>until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. <sup>3</sup>After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them for forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

This is the word of the Lord; thanks be to God.

*(Aside from Mark's not original ending)*

Luke is the only gospel writer  
to end his gospel account  
with Jesus' ascension:

He led them out as far as Bethany  
(which isn't terribly far)  
and blesses them.

Do you wonder what the blessing was?  
Well in case you missed it,  
I think Jesus' blessing  
might have sounded like Buzz Lightyear,

(Ahem) "My dear friends,  
you have been witnesses to all **the** things.  
Our time together in this way  
is coming to a close.

Stay here in Jerusalem  
for I am sending you  
what my Father promised;  
peace be with you,  
and now go tell everyone,  
to infinity and beyond!"

Or something like that.

Today's scripture lesson,  
gives us a pretty clear picture  
of what went on,  
on that day of ascension,

<sup>6</sup>So when they had come together,  
they asked him,  
"Lord, is this the time  
when you will restore  
the kingdom to Israel?"  
<sup>7</sup>He replied, "It is not for you to know  
the times or periods  
that the Father has set by his own authority.  
<sup>8</sup>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."

<sup>9</sup>When he had said this,  
as they were watching,  
he was lifted up,

and a cloud took him out of their sight.

<sup>10</sup>While he was going, and they were gazing up toward heaven,  
suddenly two men in white robes stood by them.

<sup>11</sup>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.”

<sup>12</sup>Then they returned to Jerusalem  
from the mount called Olivet,  
which is near Jerusalem,  
a sabbath day’s journey away.

<sup>13</sup>When they had entered the city,  
they went to the room upstairs  
where they were staying,  
Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew,  
Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew,  
James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot,  
and Judas son of James.

<sup>14</sup>All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer,  
together with certain women,  
including Mary, the mother of Jesus,  
as well as his brothers.”

This is the word of the Lord; thanks be to God.

What a time to have been alive, I tell you.

Jesus, our favorite teacher and mentor,  
is horrifically crucified by the Roman state  
and religious compliance.

But he defeated death!

He rose to new life!

Talk about going outside the boundaries!

Does the resurrection, usher a new meaning of infinity?

What will happen next Lord?  
Are you going to make Israel mighty again?

I'm willing to bet  
that during those 40 days  
between the resurrection and the ascension,  
the disciples are just like my children during quarantine,

'What are we gonna to do today, Mom?  
What are we gonna do today, Mom?  
What are we gonna do today, Mom?!'

I bet the disciples are likely asking Jesus a million questions  
about what will happen next.

“Is this the time when you  
will restore the kingdom to Israel Lord?”  
You said you were going to the store,  
Mom can I go too?  
You said you were going somewhere Lord,  
can we come too?

“...and lifting up his hands,  
he blessed them,”  
Luke says.

Not shockingly Jesus reacts better to pestering questions than all of us.  
“You will receive power  
when the Holy Spirit has come upon you...”

And so here we are  
—the 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Eastertide,  
past the resurrection  
and not yet at Pentecost—  
smack dab in the middle of the waiting.

As we anticipate Pentecost,  
that moment of the Spirit's inbreaking,  
the outpouring of Jesus' continued presence with us,  
we remain in this moment...  
of ascension.

We have to wait.

The church is about to be born—  
it will burst with life,  
as we will hear next week.

But we, right now,  
are invited to sit in this moment of anticipation  
for what will come next.

To stay together and wait for the power,  
wait for the blessing to be fulfilled.

To stay together  
and wait for the power of the Spirit  
to start something new,  
to wait for the blessing to come fruition.

I have can't tell  
whether I'm preaching  
about the past  
or the present.

Some of you are good math.  
But you know what—**you** are really good at waiting.  
**We** are really good at that.  
I know some of you don't believe that.  
But we have been practicing that for 10 weeks.

Back in the time of *before*,  
any package that couldn't get to my house  
on an Amazon Prime schedule  
wasn't worth my time or energy.  
Now, I understand why my dogs  
sit in the window  
and get super excited  
when the mail is delivered.

Waiting has become our norm.  
Watching and waiting  
in anticipation for when things change.  
I know not all of us feel excited.

Some of us are nervous and fearful.  
I have a little bit of that myself.  
Most of us are mix of all the emotions.  
Even in the fear and excitement,  
the nervousness and anticipation,  
I also am hopeful  
that when **the new** comes,  
it will breathe fresh new wind into us.  
I am hopeful that the creative Spirit of God  
that spun the planets,  
gave opossums ugly tails  
and decided that magnolia blossom  
would be the best smell ever:  
I am hopeful that same creative  
energetic, and dynamic Spirit  
will also fall on and fill up,  
**us**  
but first,  
we wait.

Will we have to wait a few days?  
Will this be a phased waiting?  
The waiting and watching we are doing now  
is much like the Spirit's outpouring  
—completely out of our control.  
All we know right now,  
is that the Spirit is promised to us,  
and the Spirit is coming.  
And we know,  
that in order for the Spirit to come,  
Jesus had to ascend.

It is almost as if Luke is saying to us in the book of Acts  
—here's how you will continue to see Jesus.  
“In my former book, O Theophilus,  
I wrote about what Jesus began to do and to teach  
until the day he was taken up to heaven....”



*Now in my second book  
I'm going to tell you  
what Jesus continued to do  
after he was taken up into heaven.*

The first part of Jesus ministry  
was on earth in his body  
by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Then his body ascended into heaven  
and that was the turning point in Jesus' mission.

The second part of Jesus' ministry  
is from heaven through his body,  
the church,  
by the power of the Spirit.

That's what the book of Acts is about  
—how Ascended Jesus...<sup>1</sup>  
sent us to infinity and beyond—  
how an ascended Jesus sends us  
with the Spirit's power  
out into the world.

“You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem,  
in all Judea and Samaria,  
and to the ends of the earth.”

Jesus gives a Buzz-like order,  
*you will be my witnesses  
to infinity and beyond;*  
at least that is what *the ends of the earth*  
would have sounded like  
to those disciples and women.

The indie rock band, Lord Huron,  
has a song called, The Ends of the Earth  
and the refrain asks,

“to the end of the earth will you follow me?”  
Isn't that a theological question?  
Isn't that what the Spirit is asking us?

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<sup>1</sup> Stan Mast, Acts 1:6-14 [https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/easter-7a-2/?type=the\\_lectionary\\_gospel](https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/easter-7a-2/?type=the_lectionary_gospel)

The boundless, limitlessness of that command,  
doesn't frighten the disciples one bit;  
and hopefully it won't deter us either.

The disciples were ready.

Eager to go out.

Chomping at the bit.

Can you relate?

But they didn't rush right out.

They were told to wait

and they did.

There are two notable things  
the disciples and women did

while they waited:

they stayed together,

and they prayed.

Both of these activities

are what the church is having to do today.<sup>2</sup>

For one, those 11 men and few women

stayed together because they knew

that the journey ahead couldn't be taken alone

—they needed each other.

And so, do we.

We can't do this alone,

we need each other.

We will stay together

—even though we've been watching the service  
in our Sunday jams and taking communion with real wine.

We will stay together

even though we are tired of Zoom.

We will stay together because

that's what Jesus, our Lord,

the Risen and ascended One,

commanded us to do.

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<sup>2</sup> Randle R. Mixon, Acts 1:6-14 Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 2 (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY 2010)  
pg.520

We will stay together through this and wait,  
because you know what  
—God’s people are really good at that.  
Our two most celebratory seasons in the church year,  
Advent and Lent,  
are all about waiting!  
Will Willimon, the Methodist preacher says,  
that our waiting implies  
that the things which need doing  
are beyond our ability to accomplish  
solely by our own effort,  
our programs, our own crusades.  
Some other empowerment is needed  
and therefore, the church waits and prays.<sup>3</sup>

I know you know the saying,  
good things come...to those who wait.  
Well Christians might rephrase that to,  
*the blessing of Christ*  
*and the power of the Spirit,*  
*come to those who wait.*

So as the physical body of Christ,  
a man from Galilee  
ascends into a cloud,  
and the Body of Christ now,  
the church,  
prepares to be born next week at Pentecost,  
this Sunday is golden opportunity  
for our church and others  
to recommit to what is our defining mission:  
to be Christ’s witnesses  
to the ends of the earth!<sup>4</sup>

For now, we wait as they did.  
We watch as they did.

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<sup>3</sup>ibid

<sup>4</sup> Salt Blog, Acts 1:1-11 <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/5/17/ascension-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-ascension-sunday>

We gather in small numbers, as they...

Sounds aching familiar, doesn't it?

But we stay together  
as witnesses to the resurrection  
and anticipate a Pentecost  
coming to us.

Now that Christ has died, risen  
and ascended to the right hand of the Father,  
there is no place where he hasn't gone.

It is limitless, endless, boundless.  
There's no time stamp with God.  
So as we wait, may we all reclaim  
our inner space commander  
to be witness of all these things,  
—to infinity and beyond!

### **Benediction**

Essentially there is nothing beyond infinity.  
But in Geometry, (which is math)—in geometry,  
if you go beyond infinity,  
you will come back  
to your starting point  
from the opposite direction.

Our starting point is in the waiting  
Waiting from a different time and a different direction  
The blessing is still the same  
You will receive the power—  
Go to the ends of the earth, beyond infinity  
in the power of the Holy Spirit, amen.