

“And So Will You”
Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53
Ascension Sunday
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I often have the opportunity to be at Fort Logan National Cemetery for an interment. Many of those interments include military honors of gun salute and presentation of the American flag. In those moments I cannot but reflect in my imagination of the obedient duty and the sacrifices of those veterans.

There are similar cemeteries all around the world. The fallen of many countries is honored in many ways, for they have all presented themselves in service of their countries. We, who benefit directly from those who were in service of the United States, owe them all our gratitude. Memorial Day is when we customarily do that.

Gracious Father, we wish this world did not require armed service. But on occasion it does. We give thanks for the service of many around the world who have served their countries. Honor them in our memories. Amen.

The writings of Luke are the single largest piece of the New Testament. Significantly, Luke writes two books: The Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. Luke’s view of history demanded that he write two books.

A playwright, when act I comes to a conclusion and the story is not over simply must write an act II. Act II will develop the story in a somewhat different direction. Today, our texts straddle the close of act I and the opening of act II. The Luke reading is from the last verses of his gospel, and the Acts reading is from the opening verses of the second book. The lights are down on the action of the first act, and they have yet to come up on the action of the second act. It is, as Karl Barth referred to it, a “significant pause.”¹ Maybe, instead of “Ascension Sunday,” we should call this “Pause Sunday.”

The Gospel of Luke finishes because every scripture has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Look into the scriptures yourselves and see if you don’t agree, invites Luke. And as the scriptures were opened to the disciples, that is exactly what they noted. It might not have gone like this. It would not be hard to have imagined God’s judgment or vengeance

¹ So attributed in William H. Willimon, *Acts*, Interpretation Series (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988), p. 20. “But the story is only at an interlude.” David L. Tiede, *Luke*, Augsburg Commentary (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), p. 444.

coming from Jesus' crucifixion. But no God's policy is now all about forgiveness.² In this pause the disciples came to understand what the first act was all about, and they believed it.

If Luke saw no need to write the second act this realization would be enough. That is, if act I were all that was called for, then Christians might just be the ones who study scriptures and come up with conclusions like this. They might be like judicial lawyers, poring over precedents, looking for proof texts, making the case over and over and over again that Jesus was the one, and that God forgives. End of story.

There is some seduction in all this: rendering that Christian faith as a kind of way to *think* about God. Some say that it is the perennial Lutheran heresy. If you can just get your mind right about how it is that God saves through Jesus Christ, even to get it right that God saves graciously, without any merit of our own to claim, then the Christian faith is complete.

But Luke does write that second book. The Christian faith can't just be about getting one's mind right. What more is it?

You can imagine with what lumps in their throats the disciples' eyes follow Jesus into heaven. No wonder they were fixed to the spot. They had just made connection between all that was in scriptures and Jesus' fulfillment of all that. And then Jesus leaves them. The one about whom all the scriptures were fulfilled was gone. No wonder they gazed after him all slack jawed with their eyes filling with tears.

Stop the story here and we are set up for a great Christian sentimental pietism, a smug gnosis (a secret Christians might have over the world), a "memorial society for a dead Jesus"³ that remembers nostalgically back to the time when he eat broiled fish on the beach, presented himself to be examined for flesh wounds, and made himself known in the breaking of the bread. Stop the story here and we would be set up for a Dan Brown⁴

²Tiede, p. 442.

³ Willimon, p. 21.

⁴ "In the Brownian worldview, *all* religions — even Roman Catholicism — have the potential to be wonderful, so long as we can get over the idea that any one of them might be particularly true. It's a message perfectly tailored for 21st-century America, where the most important religious trend is neither swelling unbelief nor rising fundamentalism, but the emergence of a generalized "religiousness" detached from the claims of any specific faith tradition.

The polls that show more Americans abandoning organized religion don't suggest a dramatic uptick in atheism: They reveal the growth of do-it-yourself spirituality, with traditional religion's dogmas and moral requirements shorn away. The same trend is at work within organized faiths as well, where both liberal and conservative believers often encounter a God who's too busy validating their particular version of the American Dream to raise a peep about, say, how much money they're making or how many times

or a William P. Young.⁵ But Luke's act II shows that these are all the wrong places to look for God.

So, then to the disciples, and now to us, the messenger interrupts our sad goodbye to ask the question to those who look for God in all the wrong places. Instead of, "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" he asks, "Why do you stand here looking up into heaven?"

The good news is that he will return. The good news also is also, "wait now for awhile." "Great power will come upon you. . . and you will be my witnesses," starting here and spreading over the whole world. Interlude moves to act II.

Act II is about a God who is busy making good on God's promises. The "world" of Acts is not a world of prophecy or theology or commandments or the drama of salvation. Act II is about a world that is real, what is really going on in people's lives, and that is a world in which God is up to powerful things. This is a world about ordinary folk who live their own lives with aspirations, fears, setbacks, and risk. Act II is the story about how you and I can get in on this world. The answer to the question, "Is all of this true," is not our trotted out arguments of philosophical, catechetical, or theological propositions or speculations. It is not enough to know only *about* Jesus.

The answer to the question "Is all this true?" is our lives, yours and mine. To answer this question, "Is all this true?", the world now watches our lives, yours and mine.⁶ Once this liturgically short pause, this wait, is over – we've got only one week to wait for Pentecost -- what do you suppose God will be up to in your life in act II?

We all need to get better at noticing what God is up to in our lives. Indeed, that is a major mission emphasis we have identified for this congregation. Act I isn't enough. Act II suggests God is up to something in *your* life.

Do you suppose God will stay at church where we might often like to keep God?
Do you suppose God will stay put in the Bible stories?
Do you suppose God will reside with the clergy club (horrors)?
Do you suppose God will be present only in those most orderly of liturgical actions and observances?
Do you suppose God will take up residence only in your *mind*?

Or do you think act II will be more unruly than that?
Or do you think God will successfully escape religion and pietism and spirituality – whatever?

they've been married." Ross Douthat, "Dan Brown's America," *The New York Times*, May 18, 2009.

⁵ *The Shack* (Windblown Media, 2008).

⁶ Willimon, pp. 3-4.

Or do you think God, with this unmanageable news of forgiveness, will end run our management of him altogether?

Or do you think God might start showing up at school, at the office, in your co-worker, in aisle 5 at the supermarket, in the operating room, your kitchen, or on Wall Street?

Do you think God might be up to something in your life?

Ascension Sunday is not about the scientific parsing of a levitating Jesus. Knowing Jesus this Sunday is the pause before Jesus starts showing up in the lives of ordinary Christians. At the beginning of this pause they are all disciples. Now they wait and pray. Soon act II will swirl into motion, and they shall all be apostles. And so, good friend will you.

Amen.