

Luke 24:44-53

Acts 1:1-11

In Between

*Jesus, present in the in between and insecure moments
of our lives*

The Letter of Theophilus

The imaginary letter Theophilus wrote in response
to Luke's original ones of his Gospel and Acts.

My dear Luke,

Thank you for your first book about Jesus... As you can guess... I was most intrigued to hear you were writing a second volume... and have been looking forward to it with expectation... I did wonder how this wonderful story could continue after resurrection... and so on receiving your second volume... I was keen to start reading straight away...

In your first book you kept me gripped with a story full of wonder and grace... of healing and miraculous events... but more than anything... it was Jesus who fascinated me... a miracle worker yet whose miracles were incidental to the purpose of his life... which was to offer and show us how to live life fully given over to the love of God...

I was fascinated therefore with the details you gave of the resurrection and the sightings of him after those mysterious events at the empty tomb... And to imagine all you say is true... makes it even more of a tale of wonder and grace...

Imagine then... what it was like to open your second volume and read straight away the story of Jesus departure from among us... My heart skipped a beat as I imagined in my mind his ascension... I must confess I did wonder what was going to happen to Jesus ever since the early days of resurrection... I knew in my heart of hearts he couldn't be with us always... so limited geographically to one place at a time...

But an ascension... such a difficult thing to imagine... I can't tell if you are offering a symbolic story here... or outlining the facts... either way... the means of his departure seem unimportant...

I imagine you are saying that it is what is left in his place that is important... and the implication of the two men who turn up as the disciples stare into space... as if longing for Jesus to be with them... is beautifully and subtly made... Though I have to confess... I can imagine how they felt... those poor disciples... having been through so

much... tying their whole lives and livelihood to Jesus... and now all of that familiarity is gone... It must have been quite a blow to them...

So far... I have read but the first page... and am looking forward to hearing how the tale will grow... but I imagine that they will discover they have been left with more than they imagine... a confidence? I am sure... a hope? I am certain... but if everything I have read so far is true... and I do not doubt you one bit, Luke my friend... then there will be love... a love that has seen all things... even death being defeated... and in that Spirit and truth... I dare not even imagine what might yet happen to this new movement...

Jesus is gone... but it seems he is more alive now... than ever before...

Thank you for encouraging my faith... with your own... I am beginning to trust this adventure called The Way...

Your friend,

Theophilus¹

I have to confess, I was not paying good attention when I choose today's readings. It turns out that the Presbyterian Church in Canada made an error when preparing the reading list for today and called today Ascension Sunday, and I just went with it. But really Ascension Sunday would be next week, the Sunday after Ascension Day which lands on Thursday this week.

Still, I decided that the error might be worth working with. So rather than talking about Ascension after the fact, when most of us have missed it, because who is paying attention to that Christian holiday anyway, you now have an opportunity to pay attention when Thursday rolls around.

It is interesting that as Presbyterians we spend little to no time on pondering this moment in our faith history. In my previous work, I spent time on a Hutterite Colony as a music teacher, in that tradition Ascension is a holiday and no one works or goes to school. They spend the time in worship.

So what is it about Ascension that makes it worth paying attention to?

Part of the challenge of Ascension is that it appears to be a time when God is not present. It is in between Jesus' being with his disciples in his physical body and when the promised Holy Spirit comes with power in what we celebrate as Pentecost.

And let's face it, most of us don't really appreciate the in between times in our lives. When one is in between jobs life can feel pretty insecure. Even if another job is waiting for you, there are the unknowns of the future and the loss of the past. There are wonderful in between times, like the time between an engagement and a wedding, or

¹ Written by Roddy Hamilton, and posted on **Listening to the Stones**.
<http://newkilpatrickblog.typepad.com/nk-blogging/mucky-paws/>

the confirmation of pregnancy and the birth of the child, the purchase of a house and the possession of it. Still there is always the wondering about the future, for some wondering if the wedding really will come to pass, or will the baby be healthy, will the house be what we hoped for when we move in.

There are the more difficult transitions of in between. The in between of a biopsy and awaiting the results, the cancer diagnosis and treatment; in between one migraine headache and the next; in between relationships; in between when a loved one dies and one finds a new normal, or what can seem like an endless in between when one is diagnosed with dementia. And in all of these examples it is not just one person who is affected, in between times touch the lives of everyone who is in close relationship to the one going through the transitions.

We really don't like transitions, even good ones. In the church we really don't like transitions. We resist them pretty strongly. I have heard comments when introducing new hymns, which are really already getting old when you consider that our hymn book was published in 1997. Or if we use a different version of the Lord's prayer. It is hard to get our minds wrapped around a change of focus as well. We are very good at looking out for each other, watching out for one another, but if one suggests that we should be looking outside of ourselves to those on the street or how we might use our money to do more than pay the bills to keep the church running, then we have a difficult time letting go of our long-held view of how our church should look and who can easily become a part of it.

In the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts, we are shown what it can be like to live in the in between time. In this moment the disciples watch as the one who has led them through so much, who has been the source of their hope is taken up. Leaves them, and they have not yet received the gift of the promised Holy Spirit. It is a time of uncertainty. Jesus is gone, but they don't know how long it will be before the Holy Spirit will come. They don't even really know what it will be like to receive the Holy Spirit. All they have to hold onto in this moment is the promise.

They also know what they are supposed to do. Jesus made it clear when he said to them,

⁴⁴“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.”

⁴⁵Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. (Luke 24:44-47 NRSV)

Their work is to bring the good news of repentance and forgiveness of sins to the nations. They will receive the Holy Spirit to give them the power to do that, but they already know what they are called to do.

Just like the disciples, we experience in between times as individuals and as the church. As the elders and other groups within the church meet monthly they are consistently asking the question what is next. In fact, we seem to live in a perpetual state of in between what has been done and what is to come. The difference is we don't have to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit is already present. We have the gift at hand. We need only believe that God is present to us through faith and the power of the Holy Spirit.

After the disciples watched Jesus ascend they did not stay there gazing and wondering, they "returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God." Our journey to Sunday worship is similar to the disciples going to the temple, and at all times we can live with great joy knowing that though life is fraught with transitions – of in between and insecure times – we are never alone.

The Holy Spirit is with us, bringing to us power and understanding, and because of that, we can live with great joy and confidence even in the midst of struggle, of unknowns, and transitions.

We have hope, forgiveness of sins, love beyond our ability to imagination, and the peace of Christ all dwelling within us each day. It is yours already. Claim it, live it, share it, trust it, proclaim it.

In Christ, with Christ, and through Christ. Amen.