

Ascension Day Year C

Acts 1:1-11, Ephesians 1:15-23, Luke 24:44-53

Hindsight is a wonderful thing, isn't it? Luke had it when he wrote about the ascension of Jesus. And of course, Paul had it when he wrote his letter to the Ephesians.

But what of Jesus's disciples, caught in limbo between the resurrection and ascension? What did they make of it?

Here is Jesus, gloriously, joyfully risen from the dead. More divine somehow but also more private, less active. There is no feeding of thousands, raising the dead, healing the sick. No more sending the disciples out to the villages on ministry missions. And, crucially, no preparation for miraculously kicking out the Romans and reestablishing the Jewish nation of Israel.

Because Jesus has a different agenda, a heavenly, universal one. And it needs something to be in place first. Which is why Jesus says to the disciples "*wait*". Wait for a very specific purpose.

The first time I preached up in the elevated pulpit in Holy Trinity Ripon, to a larger congregation than that I had done so previously, I power-dressed. I dressed in one of my business suits. Ridiculously it gave me some confidence.

Well, the disciples are to wait for some real power-dressing. They are to wait to be *clothed with power from on high*.

Well, in view of their later joy, I imagine that the disciples are excited at the prospect of this power-dressing. Not delegated power from Jesus as on their village ministry missions, but real personal Holy Spirit power.

Perhaps they recall Jesus saying *Very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate (that is, the Holy Spirit) will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you* (John 16:7).

Then suddenly it happens, the ascension. As Jesus ascends he leaves a rather challenging message to be his *witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth* and this tantalising promise of power through baptism in Holy Spirit.

So the disciples, some of whom doubted at first as Matthew tells us (28:17), return to Jerusalem *with great joy*, not the sorrow at Jesus's departing that we might expect.

Paul, writing to the Ephesians some thirty years later, has a much clearer understanding of this power. It is the power of resurrection, first to raise Jesus from the dead back to be physically present with the disciples and then to raise him to the heavenly realms to be seated at the right hand of God the Father. Paul is not talking here about an elevation to heaven such as we expect after our deaths. No, this is an elevation to a position of dominion over every rule and authority in the universe.

Nothing happens - Putin, Trump, Netanyahu, Starmer – without it being permitted by Jesus. Which is one reason why prayer can be so powerful; we pray in the name of the holder of ultimate authority.

Furthermore, as Paul writes in Ephesians 2:6 *God raised **us** up with Christ and seated us **with him** in the heavenly realms **in** Christ Jesus*. Raised with Christ, seated with Christ, in Christ.

Those of us in Christ are already seated spiritually with him in the heavenly places, as the Collect for today indicated. It is a done thing, not future tense.

If we are in close communion with Jesus we can look on things from his perspective. And what is more, as a result, amazingly, we can share something of his power and authority.

Paul says in verse 19 of the Epistle, this power is for us who believe - even if we don't recognise the fact.

It seems that the Ephesians didn't, because Paul prays for them *that the eyes of (their) heart(s) may be enlightened in order that (they) may know... (God's) incomparably great power for us who believe*. Or as some translations have it **towards us who believe**.

God is for us. He is pro. The resurrection and ascension do so much more than open a channel for us to join Jesus in heaven later. They open a two-way channel now: a channel for us into heaven now, and in future, and a channel

for the incomparably, immeasurably great power of God to flow to us, to be poured out on us now, as we see at Pentecost. It's a double blessing.

Do you feel powerful? Full of **God's** power that is, perhaps even just a little bit? God's *incomparably great power is for us who believe*.

What power is this? It is power to live blameless lives. It is power to know intimately God's love for us. It is power to hear Jesus's voice. It is power to grow in love, joy, peace, patience etc. It is power to minister God's love to others.

And I think that it is for this power of the ministry gifts such as prophecy, service, faith, teaching, healing and encouragement, gifts of the Spirit that will serve others, for which Jesus tells his disciples to wait.

Andrew Wommack writes, *We must believe to receive, and if we doubt, we'll do without*. Actually, that's only half true. We are all believers so we all have access to Holy Spirit power. We don't need an extra special something.

But we do need to believe that we have access to this power so we can use it. And how much belief we have determines how much access we have.

At the moment I am reading a book called 'The Familiar Stranger' by American Pastor Tyler Staton.

In his introduction he recounts how he came to London seeking Holy Spirit after hearing about the Anglican renewal. At the church service he attended he went forward for prayer, only to find that the pastor instead took him around the church and gave him instruction on praying for others. Afterwards Tyler asked the pastor why he had done that.

The pastor replied "I heard the Lord whisper to me, 'Here's a man filled with the Holy Spirit who has no idea how to live in the power of the Holy Spirit. Show him,' So I did."

You know, I found this encouraging. Specifically this is ministry power. I have long yearned to know that power so that when I offer to pray for healing for someone, say, it can be at least with some expectation that Holy Spirit power will flow and minister the healing.

Perhaps Andrew Wommack is right: we must believe to receive, or at least, as Tyler Staton indicates, believe that we have already received.

The power of resurrection and ascension to the heavenly realms has personal relevance for us now, as well as in the future.

Sadly, although this is what I read in the scriptures, it is not what I read in my own experience. There is a gulf, a mismatch between that and me. But there must be more, more than we have known so far. Let us reach out for it.

It is for our good that Jesus ascended. He says in John (14:12) *Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.*

God's *incomparably great power* is for us who believe. "We must believe to receive, and if we doubt, we'll do without." And so will others around us.
Amen

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