

May 28, 2017 Ascension
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Acts 1:1-11, Ephesians 1:15-23
Luke 24:44-53

Grace and peace, wisdom and revelation, to you, beloved of Christ. Amen.

There are two sort of geeky technical things worth noting this morning:

First, today we are celebrating the Ascension—and if you are watching closely, you know that we're a few days late—Ascension Day was actually this past Thursday, the 40th day after Easter.

Technically, today is simply another Sunday in the Easter season, the 7th Sunday.

But since we didn't gather on Thursday let's splurge and celebrate in the midst of this long weekend.

Next Sunday, the 50th day of Easter, we'll celebrate again the Spirit's coming with Pentecost.

That was geeky note number one.

The other is that reminder that scholars are quite confident that the same person wrote the Gospel of Luke as wrote the Acts of the Apostles—Acts, then, is a sequel of sorts.

The Gospel came first, the story of Jesus life from birth to death, to and resurrection, and finally today his Ascension, where Jesus is taken up into heaven (wherever precisely that is).

The writer-Luke's second book is called simply Acts, of Acts of the Apostles.

Have you noticed in the bulletin that the Spanish name for this book is Hechos (A-chos), a word we often translate as facts or deeds or events or even incidents?

Today's first lesson from Acts picks up at the very end of the Gospel story.

It reminds readers about the Ascension (in case they missed that first book)

and then it tells us what happens next as the news about Jesus spreads far and wide.

This morning we heard both of Luke's accounts of the Ascension, and they both make my neck hurt.

All that the disciples had been through,

all the grief and tension of their friend's death and the politics, all the emotion of his rising, and now, finally, he'll no longer be with them in his physical form.

As he ascends they are left standing around, craning their necks, probably squinting at the bright sky, perhaps crying (that would be my stress response after all that has happened).

The verbs in the Greek could actually be translated not simply looking up or gazing, but gawking.

Their necks must have hurt, but how could you NOT stare, wide-mouthed, into the sky as your friend and teacher, your Savior, is taken up?

I spent some time on Friday at home in north Minneapolis sorting out our bathroom cabinet—the catch all for sheets and towels, bathroom supplies, extra tooth paste, band-aids, and the like.

It was such a gorgeous day, we had all the windows wide open to bring in the fresh air.

As I (happily) cleaned, I heard helicopters start to buzz overhead and then they kept buzzing.

I remember looking out the bathroom window, craning my neck to get a good look,

and noticing that they weren't the longer medical helicopters carrying a critical patient to the hospital, but rather the smaller ones that news channels like WCCO or KARE 11 might run.

Besides the incessant noise, and after that glance, I didn't think much more about the helicopters until later when my neighbor sent a text message saying we were encouraged to stay inside the house.

A man had escaped from prison and they were looking for him in our areas of north Minneapolis.

Let me be honest, this got my attention: it lured me to the computer where I could read the news reports right out of a crime thriller, a stolen van, someone on the run, perhaps sighted in the nearby cemetery.

I could read that our daughter's school was locked down and they weren't outside on this beautiful day.

And, I could follow in real-time the helicopter cameras panning the area—oh, there's a familiar building, or that's a cross street I recognize—this footage, it just sucked me in.

Finally I ventured out, attentively, to drive to that locked down school and pick up Eliza for an appointment.

As I drove through these neighborhoods, probably a little more alert than usual, it was, indeed, beautiful and quiet (people were mostly inside), the Memorial Day flags fluttered softly as I passed the cemetery.

A few hours later the whole manhunt ended not too far from here, not too far from our church.

The fellow was spotted at Van Cleve Park and then was arrested on the edge of 35W.

Between the helicopters and the real-time footage, it was hard not to get caught up in the drama, it was hard not to crane my neck, gawking.

“Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” That's the question the two in white robes ask the disciples in today's story: **“Why do you stand looking up?”**

Just before that Jesus assured them the Holy Spirit was coming, and he reminded them of their identity, their role: “You'll be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth,”

Then, still, they stand craning their necks skyward,

“Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” That's such an important question.

Don't just look up—it'll eventually make your neck hurt.

Look around, that is where the Spirit of Jesus and the community of Christ are on the move, look around.

So while the helicopter cameras were panning for hours the mostly quiet streets of north Minneapolis, the legislative special session had just concluded.

A determined group of immigrants had kept a 52 hour vigil and hunger strike at the state capitol.

They were praying the governor this weekend would veto legislation aimed to limit their ability to get something as simple and vital as a driver's license.

Others, maybe even some of you, were at the capitol this week as bills came forward about everything from education to paid sick and safe time, from funding for transit systems to health care.

Why do you crane your neck to heaven? Look around, look around, look closely all around.

Terri Endres, an ELCA deacon, a friend and a colleague, the chair of the Lutheran Campus Ministry Board, sent a note from her travels this week in Jerusalem.

Remember how Jesus says you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and to the ends of the earth?

Look around: Terri wrote, "This has been quite a week to be in Jerusalem.

First we witnessed a huge celebration all week for the 50th anniversary of the Six Day War and the 'reunification of Jerusalem'...;

then the visit from Trump (we headed to Masada and the Dead Sea at 2am to get out of Jerusalem); Ascension [on] Thursday on the Mount of Olives and the start of Ramadan (tomorrow)."

Terri continues, "I was at Lutheran Church of the Redeemer talking with our ELCA missionary ... when she shared that ... Coptic Christians had been gunned down in Egypt [on Friday].

They rang the church bells in remembrance of those that died and in support of their Coptic neighbors at [the] Church of the Holy Sepulcher."

Terri finishes, "Please keep all here in Jerusalem in your prayers."

Look around: the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, is active all around us, look around, look around.

So easily we could get absorbed in the drama of the day, so easily we could fail to look around.

Today as we worship, 300,000 people are gathering in Wittenberg Germany to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation; a contingent from our synod joins this tremendous group in worship.

Closer to home, Minneapolis Area Synod recently distributed 500 trees to honor this same anniversary.

Our congregation already had plans to order three trees through the Tree Trust and today after worship we move outside to dedicate them as part of the 500 in this same reforming spirit.

While we could spend our time looking backward over these last 500 years, instead we're renewing our reforming identity and planting trees for the future of God's good earth and the health of creation.

Look around. These early summer days, look closely at the beauty, the possibilities, and look just as closely at hurt, the injustice, the quiet and real pain in another's eyes.

Look beyond yourself, but look, too, at your own life: the places where you feel good and on and balanced, and the broken, ragged places where you cry for Christ's healing and for the Spirit's hope.

Will we simply crane our necks, eyes on heaven, or will the power and promise of Jesus' Ascension be our call to look around, alert, attentive, honest, clear-eyed,

trusting the power of the Spirit that is already at work in you, in me, in Jerusalem and so far beyond?

Look around, you witnesses of God, look around, the Spirit is already here. Amen.