

“Our Love Is Here to Stay”  
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler  
May 12, 2024  
Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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Acts 1:1-11, 15-17, 21-26

Today at PCL, we commemorate Jesus’ ascension, 40 days after Easter. Except the 40 day mark was really last Thursday, and that’s officially Ascension Sunday in the Christian calendar for both Protestants and Roman Catholics. Our church doesn’t typically do an extra service for Ascension though, so here it is. But the Catholics did have a service Thursday night, and in our town, it was also their Confirmation Sunday. We have a family friend who was confirmed that night– I didn’t go due to my kid’s soccer championship tournament. But I heard the service was spectacular. The Bishop preached. He made the connection between Jesus’ ascension, and the promise of the coming Holy Spirit, like a mighty flame. And at the very end of the service, something behind the altar caught on to a lit candle, and there were big flames. My friend Brigitte, whose son was getting confirmed, says that she initially thought the Bishop had planned the pyrotechnics- what better way to get 15 year olds to keep their interest in church beyond confirmation? It was an accident, though. And I can say that our church has had its own flaming accident; some of you may remember that summer worship service in the Fireplace Room where this pastor’s hair became the place of fire, if only for a second. But I have to hand it to the Roman Catholics, for getting their visuals right in line with the symbols of the Holy Spirit at just the right time. What a spectacle!

I can only imagine the visual spectacle that Jesus’ ascension might have been. Right while the disciples were looking at him, Jesus was lifted up, and surrounded by clouds. I’m not going to put energy into parsing out whether this actually happened just as the scripture reports. Certainly it defies any kind of logic, but I will argue that whether or not it actually happened does not matter so much as the *meaning* behind the story. As one preacher, Katherine Willis Pershey puts it when talking about belief in the ascension, the resurrection, and another improbability that seems core to Christian faith, the Virgin birth: “The only two places I’ve heard people gossip about someone’s virginity are the pulpit and the high school girls’ bathroom.” She argues that sermons obsessing over the historicity of these gospel experiences are “painfully boring” and can cause one to miss out on both the comfort and thrill of simply being swept away by the story. So if you are one who can only get to imagining the Ascension, but not the belief in a literal Ascension, fear not: I believe there is still life and meaning in this story for you.

So what *is* this essential meaning behind the story? The meaning is that even though Jesus has left us, his story stays with us. His power stays with us. His love stays with us. You can find this to be true, in Jesus' instructions, and his promises.

First, in Acts, Jesus instructed his followers to **wait**. He ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to "wait there for the promise of the Father." He promised that while John baptized them with water, in not many days from now they will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.

The disciples then tried to pinpoint the time, and what exactly will happen with this promised time. "Is this the time when the kingdom of Israel will be restored?" they asked him.

But Jesus answered them, "It is *not for you to know the times* or periods that the Father has set." So they had to be comfortable with the anticipation, the longing, the not-yet nature of how things were, trusting that there will be a becoming that will fill and satisfy.

I know that each of you out there is probably waiting on something. Maybe you are waiting on a job offer. Medical test results. Maybe you are waiting to hear if your adult child will call you on Mother's Day. I spent time last week with a young mother who is waiting for many things at once as she moves from a place of constant struggle to a place of empowerment, and I can see her journey will be a long one. I imagine there are even those of you who are waiting— desperately— to see if God will answer your prayers, show up for you, and prove that you are cared for.

I wish I had the proof you are looking for. I wish your answers were nearer than they are far from your sight and experience. But when you are frustrated by the wait, take heart that even the disciples, who had direct experience of Jesus' teaching, were told to wait, too. And remember that, like the disciples, we aren't waiting for *nothing*.

What were the disciples waiting for? Jesus promised his followers that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them. Power? That's even better than fire! One of the things I have learned is my role as a pastor, in addition to preaching, is matching up the power I see in the different congregants, with a ministry or need that is within our church or community. Some of you do not realize just how powerful you are. Something meaningful about belonging in a spiritual community is that we can hold a mirror to one another and say, "Look here! I can see how the Spirit has put something wonderful within you. Can you not see it?"

Once that power has been received, Jesus instructed, we are to become **witnesses**. And not just in Jerusalem, but in all Judea and Samaria, and all the ends of the earth. In other words, what we have to share doesn't just stay here in this church. Good news is meant to be shared. That may take the form of storytelling. But it may also be as St. Francis of Assisi taught, "Preach the gospel at all times. When necessary, use words."

I learned more over the weekend about the witness of Anna Jarvis, the woman who started the movement to create Mother's Day as a national celebration. Now there are lots of origins to Mother's Day, from ancient goddess rituals of the Greeks and Romans, to the three-day feast in Ethiopia at the end of the rainy season, which ends with mothers and daughters anointing their bodies with butter and dancing, to the abolitionist and suffragist Julia Ward Howe, who issued a Mother's Day proclamation which urged mothers to unite in promoting world peace. But in the US, Anna Jarvis is the one who brought Mother's Day into a national, annual celebration. Anna Jarvis didn't have any children. But she was so impacted by the witness of her own mother— who had started through her Sunday School Mothers Day Work Clubs to teach women how to care for their children. In one of her mother's lectures, Anna Jarvis— who was 12 at the time— heard her mom passionately pray "that somebody would create a day commemorating mothers for their service to humanity." Anna never forgot that prayer, and as an adult held a letter writing campaign— to Mark Twain, President Roosevelt, and anyone with power she could think of— to make Mother's Day a national celebration. Her witness remains.

We Christians are left with the recorded witness of those who continued to share the word about Jesus. We have that in scripture, and we are asked to share it, too. Witness of the Gospel According to Luke and the Acts of the Apostles were written by the same person. Some scholars say that a good way to distinguish the two books is that Luke could be nicknamed "The Acts of Jesus" while Acts could be called "The Acts of the Holy Spirit" <sup>1</sup>since it details the activity of the Holy Spirit in the church after Jesus' departure. But although Jesus departs in the very first verses of this book, what he has left his disciples, his followers, the world... what he has left *us* is here to stay.

Many people take great comfort, when someone they love has died, to think that that person has ascended into heaven. And that thought usually gives me comfort too, even though how that happens, and what heaven is like, is very much a mystery to me. The most I can say about that is that I trust that in some way, our spirits go on to dwell with God. But what also gives me comfort— at least, the part of me that still needs what the loved one gave me in their life here on earth— is that the love we had, the love they gave

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<sup>1</sup> Noel Erskine, "Acts 1:1-11, Theological Perspective" in *Feasting on the Word Year B V. 2 (Lent Through Eastertide)*.

me, does not die when they die. That love is an investment that I get to keep and possibly even grow, or even share with others.

Jesus' ascension was different than a death. He died 43 days before, on Good Friday, in the worst kind of death the Roman Empire offered. Three days later, he rose, and his resurrection released the ways that grief held his followers captive. His death also released the grip of the powers that seek to dominate and destroy. After going through all of that, and after his disciples coming to grips with the miracle of his resurrected presence, I can imagine that Jesus' ascension would not hit them spiritually in the same way as his crucifixion did. Most importantly, Jesus lets them know that everything that he gave them lives on with them and will continue, with the help of the Holy Spirit. His love is here to stay.

"Love Is Here to Stay" ironically was George Gershwin's last musical composition before he died young, at age 38. His brother Ira added the lyrics to Gershwin's musical composition as a tribute to his brother, and the song remains a witness to the artistic contributions long after his death.

Nothing seems to be lasting  
But that isn't our affair  
We've got something permanent  
I mean in the way we care  
It's very clear  
Our love is here to stay ;  
Not for a year  
But ever and a day  
The radio and the telephone  
And the movies that we know  
May just be passing fancies  
And in time may go!  
But, oh my dear  
Our love is here to stay  
Together we're  
Going a long, long way  
In time the Rockies may crumble  
Gibraltar may tumble  
They're only made of clay  
But our love is here to stay.

Jesus has ascended. But the love he has set within us remains. It is here to stay. That *is* power. As witnesses, let us share that love with the world. Thanks be to God.

