

How Will I Know? It's Not for You to Know

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on Acts 1:1-11
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I.*

Among the most timeless expressions of Christian faith throughout the centuries might not be the most obvious. I'm not talking about worship or prayer, not about feasting or studying, not about serving or accompanying. I'm not even talking about church business meetings! For it is in the questions that punctuate a Christian life.

Oh how Christians have longed to *know*.

Since Jesus walked the earth, the centuries have wondered how to reconcile a leader who is both Jesus and Christ, human and divine, particular and indiscriminate. Endless questions have been debated about biblical interpretation, what's true and what's literal, what is absolute and what needs more context, what to do with troubling stories or contradicting claims. Christians have wondered what saves us: faith or works... or both? What happens after we die? Why did a good God create a suffering world? How does prayer even work? Or the book title I love, "what's the least I can believe and still be a Christian?"¹

Christians have sought to answer the practical questions of life together: who has authority to speak on God's behalf? Who gets included in the ministries of the church? And of course, the moral questions that history presses into view: should people own people? Is war ever justified? What about other religious traditions? Science? Culture? Partisan politics? Belonging? For life on earth and life of the ages, what matters most?

¹ Martin Thielen, *What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?: A Guide to What Matters Most*.

Socrates reminds us that “an unexamined life is not worth living.” Adding to that, lest anyone ever suggest that questions aren’t honored in the Christian story, we have only to look to Jesus, the consummate questioner himself, who taught in questions and stories, who answered questions with his own, who cried out with them to God in agony, who honored them with attention and care.

II.

It is with one central question that we have spent our Eastertide weeks: *how will we know?* How will we know that Jesus is alive? How will we know that death no longer has the final word? How will we know that God is making all things new again? How will I know?

And today on this last Sunday of Eastertide, we hear in response from Jesus himself, “It is not for you to know.”

The disciples were with him as the book of Acts begins. Scholars tell us that the same writer of Luke’s gospel wrote Acts as well, and as this story begins, he tells us about the days of Eastertide for the disciples, what they had done alongside a risen Christ. “Wait here in Jerusalem,” Jesus told them, for the promise of the Holy Spirit was soon to come.

Their simmering question bubbled right over: “Lord, is this the time when you’ll restore the kingdom to Israel?” That right there was what everyone was asking. They whispered it between them, bandied it around as a group, wondered alone in their thoughts. They had seen their Lord die a criminal’s death and again occupy this world in the cosmic triumph of resurrection. They had spent the past weeks learning from the resurrected Christ, again sharing his company, again following his lead. But ... *now what?* What’s the big event that will happen next? What unfinished business will he

attend to? And when? As one scholar says, “[Jesus] equips his followers with promises, not schedules.”² But what will it all mean for their lives? Their questions revealed their yearnings for clarity and finality and knowledge.

I wonder if their faces conveyed shock or disappointment or something else in between when he responded, “it’s not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.” *It’s not for you to know?*, they wondered. *What are we supposed to do next? Aren’t you our leader and guide?*

But he continues: “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” The words had barely left his lips when his feet left the ground. Up he rose, and a cloud swept him out of sight. The disciples didn’t have time for astonishment and confusion, because two came down – angels perhaps. “Why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

And there, the puzzling encounter ends, nary a question to be heard.

III.

“Ascension,” our Christian tradition has called this event. In some of our sister Christian traditions, Ascension Sunday is one of the four main festivals, or feast days, after Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost. Meaning: this is a vital, essential day to remember in the life of the church, yet I bet the vast majority of us would not assume it so. Celebrating the day that Jesus left? Singing hymns and praying prayers about the cloud that transported him to heaven? The scripture writers can’t even agree on precisely what happened, as the

² Matthew Skinner, *Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel: Encountering the Divine in the Book of Acts*, p6.

Gospel of Luke places it at the end of the gospel on the day of resurrection and the Book of Acts places it at the very beginning of the story of the church, some forty days after Jesus rose from the dead. Let's remember that Luke wrote them both, an account that is both beginning and ending.

Theologian Sam Wells has such a helpful description of why Ascension matters in the Christian life, so join me in being inspired by his description here.³ Imagine if you will a pair of square brackets inside a pair of curved brackets. The outer curved brackets tell the story of God's commitment to being in relationship with humankind. The first bracket on the left is that moment in creation when God sought out companionship in creation with the first humans, and the last bracket on the right would be the last moment in the arc of time when the relationship moves from temporal to eternal, from earthly to heavenly and all things are reconciled to God finally and fully.

But inside those outer curved brackets are inner square ones. The first square bracket on the left – let's call that Christmas. Not just the moment of Jesus' birth, but the whole story of his coming, of the creation of God's earthly life in Jesus in a particular human, a specific community, a singular life. And that second square bracket on the right? That's Ascension. That's the moment Jesus's earthly life ends. You might call it the flipside of Christmas. Everything in between those two brackets is the center of God's story of Love, Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection right at the crux. (Pun intended.) Stretching outward, if the story of Christmas is about God reaching down to us in Jesus, the story of Ascension is about us reaching up to God in Jesus. And pressing this point one final time, if Christmas tells us that the fullness of God dwells in Jesus who lived among humanity, then Ascension tells us that

³ Samuel Wells, *How to Preach: Times, Seasons, Texts, and Contexts*, p167.

the fullness of humanity dwelling in Jesus now lives with God. At Christmas, God reaches toward the world, God-with-us; at Ascension, the world reaches toward God, us-with-God. That is to say: every single one of us represented and embodied in Jesus, now belong with God forever. Jesus makes that possible!

IV.

I love this framing for Ascension, in part because it asks us to look with different lenses. Not just looking up with scrutiny, but looking wide with possibility. Taking the long view: of God and us, then and now and beyond. Because as he goes up, they go out. Jesus to heaven, disciples to the ends of the earth.⁴ As he transcends time, they try to quantify it. As they see an ending, he offers the power of a new beginning.

Theologian Willie Jennings reminds us that “Jesus is no action figure, no superhero to be consumed in spectacle. Watching Jesus and watching for Jesus was and is a significant temptation for his disciples. Such watching can easily undermine movement and easily undermine the priority of the journey.”⁵ We understand that tendency. For when we don’t know the answers to the questions, we might feel stuck – unsure about how to proceed, unwilling to risk a mistake, unable to trust what we can’t see.

But if we stand paralyzed by all we don’t know, then we’ll never seek out all we can discover. Because for the disciples then and now, waiting and watching and wondering must give way to witness. “You will be my witnesses,” Jesus says! The same God that reached out to the world in Jesus is the God who Jesus reaches out to on behalf of the world. That God is unconditionally committed to humans joining in the plot line. God asks us to

⁴ As noted by Willie Jennings, *Acts, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*, p19.

⁵ Ibid.

be hands and feet, hearts and minds, mouths and ears, arms and legs of the story of Love, now and forevermore. For in the absence of Jesus on earth, we have a role to play. We have a job to do! We have a story to tell.

Jennings continues: “We must never discount the next step that must be taken at the sight of Jesus’ leaving. Such a step is understandably a labored step, unsure and unclear. Nevertheless it must be taken because faith always leans forward to Jerusalem, toward the place where God waits to meet us. We are always drawn on by God to our future.”⁶ Indeed, next week we’ll turn the page from Acts 1 to Acts 2, to hear again the story of that power that came upon the disciples, power from the Holy Spirit that made them into the church. It’s a story, not of knowing but of breathing, of experiencing the power no question could answer, no words could explain. And that’s the power that created the church.

V.

One night last week, Silas was working beside me on the couch on an art heist mystery story. Their second grade class was writing longer-form stories as the year wound to a close, and Silas had imagined a mystery involving a theft of the Mona Lisa, with Sherlock Holmes on the case and multiple other famous artists as characters in his story. (Have I mentioned how brilliant and wonderful elementary school teachers are?!)

Silas had drawn the pictures, come up with a title, picked out a key plot point, invented the supporting characters... but when it came to the step-by-step action, he was a bit stumped.

“It was a dark and stormy night,” he wrote carefully. He paused in thought, turned to me, and asked, “now what happens?”

⁶ Ibid, p20.

I laughed playfully and said, “I don’t know! You tell ME what happens!”

He thought about it and wrote another sentence about Frida Kahlo’s role in the heist. Pause. “Now what happens?”

Again, “I don’t know, buddy... you tell ME what happens!”

Back and forth we went, one turn, one action, one sentence at a time until the page was filled with the fruits of his imagination.

Friends, when we stand in Jesus’s absence and wonder, “now what happens?,” perhaps if we listen closely, we’ll hear a rush of Spirit and a voice full of laughter and love that says in return, “It’s not for you to know! You won’t know everything. But you know in your heart of hearts that nothing separates you from my Love. Nothing. Not a single thing. No question. No action. So when the questions arise in all time and space, trust my love. Act from it. And you’ll receive power from the Holy Spirit and you will be my witnesses in all the earth.”

What happens next? Let’s go discover. Amen!