

May 9, 2024 – Acts 1:1-11 & Luke 24:44-53

Hollywood loves sequels. Skimming through a list of the 50 biggest movies coming out in 2024, I counted no less than 21 sequels. Literally, almost half of the major films in theaters this year will be based on previously established storylines. Some would say that this is proof that Hollywood has run out of ideas. That they have no interest in being creative or artistic. They just want to keep making money off of a tried and true idea. And there's certainly some truth to that.

But there's also a less cynical way of looking at this phenomenon. And that is that every ending is a new beginning. Whenever any story ends, there's a part of us that really wants to know, "And then what happened?" Hollywood makes sequels because people pay to see them. One story may have ended, but we know that there's another story that's just begun. And we want to see it.

And that's true of life in general. For the past two days, we've had graduation ceremonies in our sanctuary. The school year is ending. But that ending is also the beginning of something. Our preschoolers are now kindergartners. Our kindergartners are now 1st graders. Our high school seniors are now college students freshmen. Our college seniors are now entering the workforce. The end of one thing is the beginning of something new.

That's very much what we are celebrating here this evening on the Feast of the Ascension. The end of one thing. And the beginning of something new.

So what ended on the Ascension? Well, Jesus' bodily ministry ended. His bodily presence on earth ended. Jesus would no longer be walking among us.

There would be no crowds of people gathering around him to hear him preach. No more feeding of thousands with just a few loaves and fish. No more droves of people healed with a touch or demons cast out with a word.

Most of all there would be no more training for the disciples. Because that's what the previous three years had really been: training. There's a reason why Jesus is referred to as "rabbi" throughout his ministry. It's not just a meaningless honorific.

Jesus was a teacher. A teacher to the crowds, yes. But more importantly, a teacher to his disciples. While the crowds got a parable, the disciples also got an explanation to the parable. While Jesus withdrew from the crowds for prayer, Jesus invited his disciples to join him in prayer. While the crowds received a miraculous distribution of bread and fish to end their physical hunger, Jesus' disciples were taught to receive his Body and Blood for the forgiveness of their sins.

And so, from the disciples' perspective, the Ascension really is their graduation ceremony. For they will no longer be sitting at Jesus' feet. Listening to him. Learning from him. Following his explicit instructions. They're on their own now. It's the end of Jesus' bodily ministry. The end of their in-person instruction as disciples.

But it's also the beginning of something new. And I think the disciples realized that. Because, as our Gospel lesson points out, they leave Bethany and "*return to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God.*"

Which is an interesting response. Just a few weeks prior, they thought Jesus had left them after he died on the cross. And they were filled with sorrow and despair. They probably felt abandoned by Jesus. Deceived. Confused. He really had saved others. Why didn't he save himself?

They quickly learned all that sorrow, despair, anger, and confusion was misplaced. "*He is not here! He has risen! Just as he said!*" The angels declared. Jesus wasn't gone. Jesus was alive. And they were filled with joy. So much joy that Luke says they could barely believe what they were seeing and hearing, they were so happy.

Fast-forward a few weeks to the Ascension. What just happened? Jesus left them... again. He's left them and this time he hasn't told them when he's coming back. *"It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority."* It's not for you to know when I'll return.

The angels after the ascension say the same thing. Will Jesus return? Yes, he will. How will return? He will return from heaven in the same way you saw him go into heaven. When will he return? ... There's no answer to that question. Because the angels don't know. Only the Father knows.

So, let's look at all this once again. Jesus leaves his disciples at the crucifixion and the disciples are sad, even though he promised to rise again on the third day. But Jesus leaves his disciples at the ascension and the disciples are happy, even though they don't have a clue when he's coming back.

This makes no sense at all! Except that it does. Because a lot changed between when Jesus left them in his crucifixion and when Jesus left them in his ascension.

For one, they have learned something important about Jesus: If Jesus says he's going to return, then Jesus is going to return. And not even death can stop him. They didn't realize that at the crucifixion.

At the crucifixion, they thought that Jesus was just... well... a rabbi. A teacher. A prophet. Peter confessed him as the Christ, the Son of the living God, and he was right. But he also really didn't know what those words meant. If he had, he wouldn't have refused to believe when Jesus said that he must die and rise again.

But now Peter knows exactly what it means to be the Christ, the Son of the living God. They all know what it means to be the Christ. It means that nothing in all of creation will stop Jesus from keeping his promises. Nothing will separate us from his love. Jesus has ALL authority, in heaven and on earth.

And so if he says that the disciples will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon them, then they will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them. If he says that they will be witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth, then they will be witnesses to the ends of the earth. If he says that they will make disciples of all nations, then they will make disciples of all nations.

And if he says that he will come again to separate the sheep from the goats, that he will come again as a bridegroom dressed for his bride, that he will come again as a master looking for faithful servants, that he will come to bring his sheep into the pasture... then he will come again. Of that, they now had no doubt at all. Jesus' ascension didn't make them sad because they knew that he would return.

And until he returned, they had a job to do. Their commander-in-chief had given his soldiers marching orders. They were to receive the Holy Spirit and be equipped for battle. They were to go to the ends of the earth, testifying to what they had witnessed. They were to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them everything Jesus commanded.

Jesus didn't just leave them to twiddle their thumbs. He gave them a job to do. In so many of those parables Jesus told about what would happen when the master returned, the message was clear: be prepared. Be a faithful servant. Do the work your master has given you. Jesus had just given them their assignment. And so now they went with joy to do the work he had given them.

And that is our assignment as well. The faith and hope and steadfastness of the disciples is our faith and hope and steadfastness. Because while the Ascension may be the end of the story of Jesus' bodily ministry, it is the beginning of the story of Jesus' ministry through the Church.

If it were a movie, it would be called, "The Gospel: Part 2." That's even how Luke frames it in his texts. The Gospel of Luke ends with the Ascension. The book of Acts begins with the Ascension. With the Ascension and with this preface from Luke. Telling his readers that just because the story of Jesus' bodily presence on earth is over doesn't mean the story of Jesus' ministry is over. The Church is still here.

And he emphasizes throughout the book of Acts how the ministry of the apostles mirrors the bodily ministry of Jesus. Jesus healed people, the apostles healed people. Jesus cast out demons, the apostles cast out demons. Jesus raised the dead, the apostles raised the dead. Jesus preached to thousands, the apostles preached to thousands. Jesus suffered and died for what he preached, the apostles suffered and died for what they preached.

Jesus rose from the dead... the apostles haven't yet risen from the dead. But they will, and we will, when Jesus returns. They believed that and it gave them joy. We believe that and it gives us joy.

The Ascension is end of one story, but the beginning of another. And when Jesus returns, that too will be the end of one story and the beginning of another. And that story will have no ending. Because there can be no end when God makes all things new. Amen.