

POINTS TO PONDER

"In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach ² until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³ After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God."

— *Acts 1.1-3*

"Luke and Acts are written by the same author(s). The 'first book' referred to is thus the gospel of Luke. Theophilus could be the name of a person, but is more likely referring to all who read this work as 'Theophilus' literally means 'friend of God.'

We notice the wording that Jesus 'began' to do and teach things in the gospel of Luke, and this next book, the Acts of the Apostles, is what Jesus continues to do through the apostles and his followers. Thus, the work of Jesus is not done, even if he is not physically present. His work, his mission, is to be carried out by his disciples.

The author states that Jesus was presented as being 'alive to them by many convincing proofs.' Of course, the need to say this makes one wonder why proofs were needed if Jesus was physically present to them. Many interpreters assume that he was physically present to them, and that the need for proofs was more for the reader to be convinced rather than the disciples.

That he was "appearing" to them over the period of "forty days" may sound like evidence itself. However, "appearing" is less decisive than "living," and 40 days was a common euphemism for a moderate period of time rather than precisely that many days. Likewise, "alive" was often used metaphorically, meaning that one was filled with spirit (i.e., spiritually alive); as well as literally, meaning that one is physically alive in the flesh. And so these word choices cast doubt as to what the author was trying to say or imply; perhaps leaving it up to the reader to determine their own conclusions.

However, there is another option that may make more sense to the postmodern reader. In this period between his death and his proclaimed ascension, the author specifically states that Jesus' speaking and instructing of his disciples was made possible 'through the Holy Spirit.' This could well be interpreted as him not being physically present, but rather spiritually present to them – a reality assumed to be possible in that era, and one that had been experienced by many others who had died. In which case, his "appearing" could have been the apperceptions of the disciples, rather than his material presence, and the "alive" could have meant his spiritual presence with them. Perhaps it is to his credit that the author left this somewhat ambiguous.

What is notable, however, in either case, is that what Jesus spoke to them about was the 'kingdom of heaven;' i.e., the very same message to them before his death. The message has not changed; and consequently, neither has the mission. Creating a world of love, peace, and justice for all creation remains the purpose of all who would call themselves disciples of Jesus."

— *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 5/15/2023*

"⁴ While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem but to wait there for the promise of the Parent. 'This,' he said, 'is what you have heard from me; ⁵ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.'"

— *Acts 1.4-5*

"Again, we may wonder whether his 'staying' with them was literal or figurative...physical or spiritual. One message is clear: they were to wait there in Jerusalem, where Jesus was imprisoned, tried, convicted, and executed until they received the promise from God of the Holy Spirit.

We might imagine that they would want to have returned back to Galilee and to their homes rather than stay in the place where Jesus was persecuted. Yet, if they had done this, it would have been quite easy to fall back into their former lifestyles rather than continue the mission of Jesus. By staying all together in Jerusalem, rather than separating and going back to their physical homes back in the region of Galilee, they would be able to nurture and encourage one another to keep the vision of Jesus alive by their continued service to his mission.

In John's gospel, their home is not considered to be the places where they formerly lived, but their living out the virtues and values of Jesus. If this was a view shared by the author of Luke-Acts, then staying together in their egalitarian community would help them find their true home in continuing what Jesus had begun – thus, referring back to the earlier statement in verse 1 that the gospel of Luke was about what Jesus 'began,' and now it was up to the disciples to continue and complete that purpose by their own lives.

How would they accomplish what Jesus did not have time to do himself? Through the baptism they were to receive with the Holy Spirit. Once the Holy Spirit lives in them as it did in Jesus, they would be ready to then go forth from Jerusalem to the world to spread the good news near and far. To have the Holy Spirit in us is not merely a matter of belief, but an all-encompassing reality that affects all of our actions, practices, behaviors, attitudes, and such. It is a complete reorientation of our lives in accordance with the virtues and values of God rather than those of empire...with divine/heavenly rather than human/earthly reality...with sacred rather than banal or profane lifestyles."

— Rev. Bret S. Myers, 5/15/2023

"⁶So when they had come together, they asked him, 'Rabbi, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?' ⁷He replied, 'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Parent has set by God's own authority. ⁸But 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.'"

— Acts 1.6-8

"The disciples are still hoping that Jesus is going to complete what he had begun; but it becomes clear here that this is not to happen through Jesus, but through them. The disciples did not get the timing right, nor did they get the whole mission right. Jesus' mission was not just to restore the kingdom of heaven to Israel, but to all nations...and not simply the kingdom of David, but the kingdom of all peoples and creatures everywhere.

Jesus' response to their confused question is deliberately vague. They are not to know the timing of things; they are simply to work towards the fruition of the mission. God only knows the timing, but our task is simply to do all we can to bring it about as best we can by our own lives – lives to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

When the Holy Spirit comes upon Jesus' followers, it means they will be witnesses and advocates of his own mission – not only in Jerusalem (i.e., Israel), Judea and Samaria (viz., all of the lands of their own ethnicity), but 'to the ends of the earth' (viz., to all lands regardless of ethnicity, religion, nationality, species, etc.).

It is clear that the Holy Spirit has not yet come upon the disciples, for they are still confused about the mission itself. They keep trying to limit its scope and purpose, and Jesus keeps prodding them to expand it to all reality.

Are we still not trying to limit the scope and purpose of Jesus, even in our claim that he is the one whom we follow? What will it take for us to see his egalitarian vision for all of creation, and not just for those who are most like us? Will we ever come to not only see his same vision, but also work towards his same mission, that is all-inclusive?"

— Rev. Bret S. Myers, 5/15/2023

"⁹ When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰ While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. ¹¹ They said, 'People of Galilee, 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.'"

— Acts 1.9-11

"Comically, we might imagine this to be like an alien abduction of Jesus, where he is 'beamed up' like as depicted in the Star Trek television series. It could explain the two men who showed up out of nowhere, and also Jesus being lifted up into the sky until a cloud blocked the view of the onlookers.

Mytho-poetically, however, we can look at this language metaphorically. Jesus being 'lifted up' indicates his glorification, the honor of being raised up to be on the level of that which is heavenly; a literary device to get us to revere his life and teachings as one we should emulate.

We recall that clouds were present in the sacred experiences of Moses on Mt. Sinai, as well as other Hebrew prophets – the clouds representing a divine presence that blocks our view of God but lets us know that God is present to us.

As with many who recall the sacred experiences of their spiritual ancestors, it is easy to become fixated at gazing into the heavens rather than to getting to work on earth. Here, we see two beings, supposedly representing the sacred, due to their white attire, asking them why they are gazing up toward heaven – the implication being that they need to get their heads out of the clouds and focused on the tasks at hand that need to be done here on earth to create justice, peace, and love between all beings.

These two beings in white are able to identify these disciples standing on Mount Olivet, where Jesus had prayed in the garden and was arrested, as Galileans – giving credence to their divine cognition. They spell it out to them that Jesus has now been taken up to heaven (i.e., has secured his destiny as being one with the divine), and will continue to come into the world (we must presume, in accordance with the theology of Luke-Acts, through their works that they carry out in Jesus' name).

In other words, what they imagine heaven to be like is to be true also on earth. What goes to heaven is to come back to earth with the same egalitarian reality. Jesus doesn't depart into heaven leaving us all behind. Rather, the heavenly life we imagine he experiences is to be made real here on earth by we who are his disciples. Heaven and earth are to be synthesized into a one reality. We are to recreate Eden on Earth – i.e., the kingdom of heaven on Earth.

The highly symbolic language thus is meant to inspire the disciples to get to work to create heaven on earth, just as Jesus had planned. We are all to bring about the Messianic Age which Jesus, the Messiah, began. We are to complete the task of Jesus; of making human reality divine reality."

— Rev. Bret S. Myers, 5/15/2023

"¹² Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away (i.e., 2000 cubits or 1,194 yards). ¹³ When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying: Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of [d] James. ¹⁴ All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers."

— Acts 1.12-14

"Having had this mystical experience on the Mount where they had last saw Jesus free and praying, the disciples return to their upper room where they had been staying. While 'upper' may describe the physical location of the room above ground level, mytho-poetically it could also mean that they were residing in an

elevated state of consciousness or being. Together, trying to make sense of their new reality without Jesus' physical presence among them, they are preparing their hearts, minds, and souls for the reception of the Holy Spirit that was in Jesus.

The eleven remaining disciples (Judas Iscariot not among them) are all gathered with one another to lend each other mutual support and advice about next steps to take. With them are Jesus' mother and brothers, along with 'certain women' which likely included those who went to tomb in Luke's gospel [viz., Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and other unmentioned 'women' (cf., Luke 24.10)]. This togetherness in an egalitarian community which Jesus himself had created gives the reader hope for these disciples trying to understand the new reality that besets them. Together, they will be able to continue "The Way;" something that would not be possible if they split up and went back to their old lifestyles.

What does the camaraderie and cohesion exhibited by the disciples and followers of Jesus tell us about how we need to live in relationship with one another? Is it possible to be a disciple of Jesus all by ourselves as our individualistic culture assumes; or do we need to be in a communitarian setting where we share all we have and all that we are with one another?"

— *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 5/15/2023*