

Winging It With What We Know [OR The Church Year and Our Weird Jesus Stories]

Luke 24:44-53 and Acts 1:1-11 – Ascension of our Lord

Pastor Caitlin Trussell with Augustana Lutheran Church on May 16, 2021

Jesus followers spend our days like most other people. We get up when we're done sleeping. Our waking hours are filled with lives, food, and activities as varied as there are people around the world. At some point, we sleep again. Jesus followers also frame our days and human doings through the extra Jesus lens and splice the church year into a highlight reel of the life and times of Jesus. While the Bible regularly shatters our assumptions, reforms our faith, and comforts our afflictions, the church year structures our societal and self-examination by spotlighting the life of God in the person of Jesus. On Sundays, and even daily, we hold up God's priorities against our own as we wing it. Okay, the "we" may be too strong. I'll confess that I wing it. Oh sure, I have a to-do list and a schedule for the day. But there are other humans involved in my day which often means reshuffling the order of things, going with the flow, and winging it. More to today's point, God is also involved in my day which means that every day is basically a new day to wing it as God's priorities often disrupt my own plans.

Today's new day finds us celebrating the Ascension of Our Lord in the church year. As Jesus followers, we recall the weirdest stories about Jesus in festive high holy days – Christmas (a.k.a. Nativity of Our Lord), we celebrate God with us in the baby Jesus, Easter (a.k.a. Resurrection of our Lord) we celebrate Jesus rising from the dead...you get the picture. Today locates us in the very last verses of Luke's Gospel and the very last Sunday of the Easter season, which presses pause even as we lean towards Pentecost next week when we celebrate the birth of the church. Today we find ourselves with the earliest disciples, looking up into the sky at an ascending, departing Jesus. Talk about winging it.

Before he lifts off, Jesus tells them to wait in the city for the Holy Spirit. The reading from the first verses of the book of Acts retells Jesus' ascension story but includes two men in white robes who ask the disciples why they're still looking up. The Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts are thought to be written by the same author. Luke covers the life and times of Jesus while Acts (a.k.a. Acts of the Apostles) covers the life and times of the early church – a sequel of sorts.

Ascension of Our Lord is the overlapping story that connects the two books. The

disciples were mesmerized, watching Jesus lift up and away. Understandably so. Imagining the disciples' shocked eyes refocusing down to ground level and being told to get a move on by those random dudes makes me chuckle at the physical comedy. They're reminded to wait in Jerusalem for the Spirit to wing in while they wing it in the meantime.

And where do they wing it? In the temple. Praising God. Luke's gospel starts and ends in the temple. In Chapter One, the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah as he went about his priestly duties, offering incense in the sanctuary of the Lord. Right then and there in the temple, Gabriel announced his wife Elizabeth's pregnancy with their son John. John would be known later in life as John the Baptist who preached repentance and prepared the way for Jesus. Here we are at the end of Luke. The earliest Jesus followers had been through the lows and highs of Jesus' death and resurrection. Before he lifted off, he told them that they were his witness and would proclaim repentance and the forgiveness of sins to all nations. Their eyes followed him to the sky before they "returned to Jerusalem with great joy" to continually praise God in the temple, basically winging it until they "have been clothed with power from on high." They had no real idea what it would look like to be clothed from on high or when that would happen or how they'd get to witness and proclaim. They were winging it with what they knew.

Unlike those earliest disciples, we have more of the Jesus story even though we still only see it dimly at the best of times.¹ But like the disciples, there's only so much that we can know at any given time to take action. Such is the way of us re-gathering in-person for worship. Augustana's Reopening Taskforce sifts through the headlines most of us see, into the fine print of CDC, state, and local guidelines that most of us never investigate. Thank God for the taskforce folks and may the Spirit continue to guide their leadership.² As much as the taskforce is helping us figure out how to worship in these ever-evolving times, this is the first time any of us have emerged from a pandemic so there is an element of winging it with what we know until more is revealed.

¹ Infers 1 Corinthians 13:12

² Augustana's Reopening Taskforce includes Augustana's Faith Community nurse as well as our Building Use Coordinator. Additionally, there are two doctors, one lawyer, one retired biology professor, one retired English professor, and one professional singer who also serves as the Covid safety officer on a different organization.

May 2nd was our first outdoor, in-person worship this Spring. There were a few favorite moments, like chatting with folks after worship and getting caught up each other's latest news. The moment that most surprised me was saying the Lord's Prayer in unison with everyone. I guess I should add that it didn't sneak up on me, I know it's part of the communion liturgy. What surprised me was my reaction. Last Fall, we didn't speak the liturgy together and now we know enough science to know that we can. "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name..."

Tears pricked my eyes and my throat tightened up. I don't have words to describe the emotions or experience, but you know me enough to know that I'm going to try anyway. Standing over communion and with you all who attended that morning and praying with confidence as Jesus taught us to pray, our voices joined together in a very ordinary and indescribably transcendent moment. Joy filled my heart. The church geek in me wishes that I could describe it better. The Christian mystic in me is delighted that I cannot. There are experiences that defy description, that no one can take away, and this is one will buoy my faith for a while. At the very least, it was on my mind when I read the verse in Luke that the disciples returned to Jerusalem and the temple with great joy.

Joy as we worship and praise God is one of our oldest Christian traditions. It looks and sounds different around the world but it's the essence of our worship even in the midst of tragedy. Joy fills us as we know that God is with us, God's promises are trustworthy, God loves us consistently no matter what we do or don't do, and that God's grace will follow us all of our days until, at our last breath, God wings us up into God. We know more of the Jesus story than our First Century siblings in Christ but, as we wing through our days by faith gifted on the wings of the Spirit, we worship and praise God in joy, through our beautiful Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Song after the sermon

Beautiful Savior (ELW #838)

1 Beautiful Savior,
King of creation,
Son of God and Son of Man!
Truly I'd love thee,
truly I'd serve thee,
light of my soul, my joy, my crown.

2 Fair are the meadows,
fair are the woodlands,
robed in flow'rs of blooming spring;
Jesus is fairer,
Jesus is purer,
he makes our sorrowing spirit sing.

3 Fair is the sunshine,
fair is the moonlight,
bright the sparkling stars on high;
Jesus shines brighter,
Jesus shines purer
than all the angels in the sky.

4 Beautiful Savior,
Lord of the nations,
Son of God and Son of Man!
Glory and honor,
praise, adoration,
now and forevermore be thine!

Text: *Gesangbuch*, Münster, 1677; tr. Joseph A. Seiss, 1823-1904