

Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity

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[0 : 0 0] Father, we begin a new series by opening up your Word and reading from the Acts of the Apostles. Lord, we see the beginnings of the spread of the Gospel, of the risen and ascended, and one day coming again, Lord Jesus Christ.

And Lord, these words are for us this morning, so help us to have ears to hear and minds to comprehend and hearts to receive everything you would teach us this morning from your Word.

Lord, may your name be lifted high. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Sometimes I troll my wife just to get her going, and I know it might not seem like a very loving thing to do, but it's actually kind of a very loving thing to do. I like teasing a little bit.

And one of the things I troll her with, and it doesn't fail to work, it always works, is I go on about how I think the whole story with Helen Keller, the deaf and blind woman, I guess 100 years ago, or she was born 100 years ago, how I think the whole thing's a hoax.

That's how I talk about it, because how can somebody who's blind and deaf her whole life come up with these incredible, you know, sayings and all of this kind of activism? And Christine's like, are you out of your mind?

[1 : 3 2] And because she says that, I keep pushing it. It's silly, it's foolish. I don't believe Helen Keller at all is a hoax or some kind of made-up story. But I love trolling Christine.

I say to her often, give me proof, give me proof. She really came up with all that stuff. And she just shakes her head. And we have a good laugh about it usually. Anyway, she shrugs me off.

And anyways, I bring up that story to pose a question to you this morning. What does it take for you to believe something? What is the proof that you need to believe that something is legitimate, something is real, something is grounded in fact?

What proofs are required for you to believe that, say, the earth is round, or the moon landing was real, or that this past week the Peruvian aliens that were on display at the Mexican Congress are legitimate?

What proof do you need that something is real? So these three examples of the moon landing being a hoax and the earth being round or flat, and even I would put forward to the aliens in the Mexican Congress, I think they're, in a sense, silly modern conspiracy theories that really only find traction because of social media, everybody having a platform and a voice.

[2 : 5 7] But what about the very ancient claim that a man died 2,000 years ago and didn't just have a fainting spell, but was buried and three days later he rose again from the dead?

How do you guys wrestle with that? What kind of proof do you need that Jesus Christ rose from the grave three days after he died on a Roman cross?

That he walked around and visited with and taught many for 40 days after his resurrection, and that after 40 days he literally ascended into the heavens.

What proof would you need to believe that? How on earth can Christine laugh at my trolling about Helen Keller? Or how on earth can we roll our eyes at flat earthers when we claim that someone rose from the grave after three days dead?

And more so, other parts of Scripture attest that if this did not happen, our faith is not just on shaky ground, but it's on no ground at all.

[4 : 08] It's foundationless. The Apostle Paul, 1 Corinthians 15, 13 and 14, says this, But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised.

And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. Friends, the real, literal, factual resurrection and ascension of Christ, no matter how outlandish and proofless it may seem, is so germane to our faith that without it our faith is rendered void.

No continues, no saves, game over. And that is a reference for you 80s and 90s kids that played regular Nintendo.

There's no saves, there's no going backs, there's no start again. Our faith is done and we are to be pitied in this life. So, like I mentioned, we're beginning this series in the book of Acts of the Apostles.

And we begin, first thing, with the resurrection and the ascension. St. Luke, a physician, wrote this second volume of Christ's life to this man, Theophilus. We're not sure who Theophilus is.

[5 : 27] The name literally means beloved of God or lover of God or loved by God. And the first volume was Luke's gospel account. This is the second volume that he'll reference right in the opening verses of our text.

And right off the bat, there is an attestation that Jesus literally, factually rose from the grave and ascended. And that fact that Luke presents, this man of science, this man of proof, will be the very thing that lays the foundation for the rest of the book of Acts.

So, this morning, we're going to look at three aspects of what makes the resurrection and the ascension true. And all these points are deeply interconnected. But for the sake of clarity, we're going to divide them up and look at them separately.

So, we're going to look at the resurrection and the ascension are factual, are biblical, and are necessary. So, let's jump right into it.

Look with me. Acts chapter 1, verses 1 to 3. This is how it opens up. In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.

[6 : 57] He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during 40 days and speaking about the kingdom of God. Some of the earliest and most persistent heresies combated by the church, and also those same heresies that come about today in the church, have to do with the literal, factual resurrection of Christ from the grave.

The creed that we just recited together goes to great lengths to articulate the legitimacy, veracity of Jesus' literal resurrection. And Luke here is really hammering it home right off the bat.

So, Luke, in both his gospel accounts and in these opening verses, describes instances where Jesus is seen by both individuals and groups, women, and that's a key bit, because women, their testimony, their eyewitness testimony was really suspect at best in the ancient world.

Not great. It's just the reality of it. So he was seen by individuals, groups, women, men, young as well as old. He ate with people. He studied the scriptures with people and taught the scriptures to people.

So he visited with the same people on multiple occasions. He was present after the resurrection for 40 days. And just to put that in kind of perspective, so we say 40 days, but that's over five weeks.

[8 : 24] T. Swift will be in Toronto for six days, and the city will be buzzing. Imagine how the news of a dead man come to life would have made its way, it permeated through Jerusalem.

Not over six days, but over five plus weeks. Luke goes to great lengths in his recorded history to make it clear that the resurrection, which would have been very strange back then as it is today, hard to believe, actually happened.

So this matters a great deal because true faith must be rooted in truth and facts. It has to be. It matters not the degree of faith I have as I walk on a footbridge, the faith I have in the footbridge and its integrity, if it's not anchored on either side or it's wobbly, or if it is shoddily made and giant waves are coming and are going to knock the whole bridge.

It doesn't matter how much faith I have in something that is not rooted and finds its foundation in truth, something that lacks integrity. So again, it matters because true faith must be rooted in truth and facts.

In my preparation, I came across this quote by a theologian named Alistair Roberts, and he says it like this, The sheer range of resurrection appearances and the many ways that Jesus demonstrates that it is indeed he, that it is who has come back from the dead, all serve to ground the faith of the disciples and to secure their witness in the resurrection.

[10 : 06] To ground their faith in facts, that the resurrection did in fact happen and was witnessed by many people. The resurrection and ascension of Jesus, it was not cooked up.

It was not the plan, the secret plan of some kind of charismatic leader to pull the wool over a bunch of gullible people's eyes. Nor was it this conspiracy made by this cabal of malicious conspirators wishing to take over the world and overthrow Rome.

The resurrection and ascension was a witnessed factual event that changed everything for these disciples and the people that they would come in contact with and in fact all of human history.

So consider this, this ragtag group that Lynn read. Some were tax collectors, one was tax collectors, some were fishermen, coming from all sorts of different backgrounds.

One was a zealot, which we think of somebody that has a lot of excitement for something or is hardcore about something, but back then a zealot was a political terrorist in a sense.

[11 : 22] It was a ragtag group of disciples that Jesus gathered together whom when he left were arrested, were beaten, were imprisoned, were scattered, all of them, but one, history tells us, were martyred.

These men witnessed the resurrection of Christ. They were empowered by the Holy Spirit and started to bear witness to the literal resurrection of Jesus and it cost them everything.

You don't do that, you don't do that for a nice idea. You don't lay your life on the line with gaining nothing in terms of earthly possession for this kind of symbolic ideal that may or may not be true, a metaphor for an unreal myth.

You do it because you have been so gripped by the power of God and empowered by his Holy Spirit that you cannot help but attest to what has happened.

It is a remarkable thing that these disciples will go to their death gaining nothing in earthly rewards to bear witness with great joy to the risen, literally risen and ascended Lord Jesus Christ.

[12 : 48] this is the key revelation of the Christian faith and it is rooted in fact. It matters. It really does.

And when the resurrection, the legitimacy of the resurrection becomes shaky because the reality is we live in a modern world and who on earth is going to believe that somebody three days in a morgue is going to come back to life?

It's hard for us to believe but if that belief starts to crumble, everything else crumbles. It is the key revelation of the Christian faith and it was attested to many over a long period of time.

I'm not trying to say, look at us, we're better than other faith traditions but consider with me how in Mormonism the key revelation was given to one man in secret and he then spread it to many other people compelling them to believe without really any kind of proof or the proof was shoddy or in Islam, Muhammad, again, private revelation where he then said, you know, you'll have to believe me.

There's no proof. There's no eyewitness. There's no proof across 40 days or even a week in this sense. The Christian faith takes great, goes to great lengths to prove the factuality of the resurrection and not by one mouth but by many.

[14 : 27] So in the same way that factual evidence is necessary for the legitimacy of the resurrection and the ascension, so too is biblical evidence necessary.

So if the resurrection and ascension are both factual, they are both biblical. What do I mean? Throughout the Old Testament, there were allusions to resurrection and ascensions which were connected to the time when the Holy Spirit would be poured out on all people and mark the beginning of the end.

the end times or the beginning of the rule and reign of God that would go on forever. That is why the disciples ask in verse 6 what they do and this is what they say in verse 6.

Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel? Lord, is this the time when the end has come? Now we'll get back to that in the third point so we'll just pause there but let's read verses 4 to 6 and dig into the biblical nature of the resurrection and the ascension.

And while staying with them that is Jesus, He, Jesus, ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem but to wait for the promise of the Father which He said, You heard from Me for John baptized with water but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.

[15 : 53] So when they had come together they asked Him, Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel? We'll pause there. Right in these three verses there are references to Joel chapter 2 and Malachi chapter 3 and 4 as well as Isaiah 30 all of which were proclaimed by John the Baptist in Luke chapter 3.

But even more than that we have resurrection and ascension patterns throughout all of Scripture that prepare us to understand not in full but in part the coming resurrection and ascension of Christ in Holy Scripture.

Just give a few examples. This is not an exhaustive list. Genesis 22 Abraham takes his son Isaac up to Mount Moriah because God has commanded him to slay his son.

And then after the Lord stays His hand the writer of Hebrews tells us that Abraham believed that God would resurrect Isaac. It's an allusion to what is to come.

There is in 2 Kings chapter 4 a dead son of a Shunammite who is resurrected. Jonah descends into the sea in Jonah chapter 2 and experiences a type of death that then he is resurrected and spat back on shore by this great fish.

[17 : 22] There is the Valley of Dry Bones in Ezekiel 37. Various references to resurrection and ascension throughout the Psalter and throughout the book of Isaiah.

In short the resurrection and its theology and the allusions are everywhere in the Old Testament. So so too are the references to the ascension.

Look with me verses 9 to 11. And when he had said these things as they were looking on Jesus was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight and while they were gazing into heaven as he went behold two men stood by them in white robes and said men of Galilee why do you stand looking into heaven?

This Jesus who was taken up from you into heaven will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven. The ascension marks the enthronement of Christ as king. He ascends to the right hand of the father to rule and reign after making his enemies his footstool.

Conquering death. Throughout the Old Testament we see this theme time and again Moses ascending to Mount Sinai to speak and to learn from Yahweh God Almighty.

[18 : 37] The Psalms there's various Psalms that speak of enthronement. David ascending with the Ark of the Covenant to Zion. Elijah ascending into heaven.

And that's just to reference a few bits of Scripture and that's actually not to say anything else about the cloud that's referenced here throughout the Old Testament that represents the very presence of God Almighty or the 40 days this pattern of 40 throughout the Old Testament that again it's either 40 days or 40 years throughout the Old Testament suffice it to say that in these first 11 verses we see reference after reference to the Old Testament that the resurrection and the ascension are deeply biblical themes.

I ask the question why does it matter? Why can't Jesus just do something that hasn't been alluded to before or there's no reference to or no fulfillment around?

This is the reason because all of Scripture all of it from the opening words of Genesis to the very end of Revelation all of Scripture hinges on Jesus and His resurrection and ascension.

All of Scripture points to Him every story every teaching every movement in Holy Scripture helps us to understand or prepares us to receive Christ His death that defeats death and sin and evil proving so by His rising from the dead and ascending so that we may know God so that perdition isn't our destiny anymore so that we can have joy unspeakable full of glory because if Jesus doesn't fulfill the Scriptures or if the Scriptures don't point to Him then He is a false Messiah a false representative of God Almighty He is a charlatan leading people astray but He is not this means that the factual biblical resurrection and ascension of Christ they matter so very much and as such they are necessary necessary for us and for the church look with me verses 6 to 11 especially 7 to 9 you're just looking at that but look at the text with me once more so when they had come together they asked Him

[21 : 11] Lord will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel and Jesus said to them it is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by His own authority but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth and when He had said these things as they were looking on He was lifted up and a cloud took Him out of their sight actually we'll stop there for now this section of scripture tells us that Jesus' ministry His mission does not end with the ascension but continues on with His disciples with the church and we see a bit of that actually in the opening few verses in chapter one it says in the first book O Theophilus I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day when He was taken up after He had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom He had chosen that language there it gives the idea that

Jesus' work what He has taught the things that He did did not stop when He ascended into heaven and they certainly did not the church takes on the ministry of Christ after He ascends and this is why He tells them that after He departs He will send the Holy Spirit who will empower them to continue His very ministry consider what Jesus says in John 16 starting in verse 5 he says this to his disciples but now I am going to him who sent me and none of you asks me where are you going but because I have said these things to you sorrow has filled your heart verse 7 nevertheless I tell you the truth it is to your advantage that I go away for if I do not go away the helper will not come to you but if I go I will send him to you and when he comes he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment concerning sin because they do not believe in me concerning righteousness because

I go to the father and you will see me no longer concerning judgment because the ruler of this world is judged the helper that Jesus is referring to is the Holy Spirit so Jesus doesn't send the Holy Spirit unless he ascends first the ministry of Jesus cannot continue unless the disciples are empowered by the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit will not come unless Jesus has risen from the grave and ascended to the right hand of the father so you see the resurrection and ascension are incredibly important for us without the Holy Spirit we cannot do anything long lasting and eternal for almighty God we just cannot we have no ability no power no strength we also lack courage all of which the Holy Spirit the helper will give now concerning the kingdom reference in verse 6 so by the time Jesus was born he came onto the scene this biblical idea of the kingdom of

God was co-opted by nationalistic purposes Israel really was subject to foreign powers time and time again century after century they had a short window a brief window albeit a very messy window of independence after the Greeks were pushed out by the time Jesus came about the Romans were occupying Israel and this did not sit well with a large majority of the Israelite population so the disciples like many other Israelites believe that the coming kingdom of God would result in the physical restoration of Israel where Rome would be destroyed and that Israel would regain its stature kind of like what it was under King Solomon but you see the Bible doesn't speak of it like that that was never God's intention rather the kingdom of

Israel would be comprised not just of one ethnicity the Jewish people but all ethnicities Jew and Gentile a reconstituted Israel if that helps you understand it Israel would be reconstituted on one hand it didn't negate the ethnicity of ethnic Israel but what it did was it expanded the borders to include all people so that everyone who had the faith in Christ the faith of Abraham Isaac and Jacob would be called God's people would be a part of the nation of Israel God's one people and what was the mechanism for spreading of this new constituted Israel the Holy Spirit would be empowered would empower the disciples would empower God's people and they would bear witness to the gospel of

[26 : 27] Christ from Jerusalem to Jakarta from Judea to Jamaica from Samaria to Sumatra to the ends of the earth it's not like I know that we joke about Torontonians thinking it's the center of the world but our world is the center of our world but the reality is this is on the outskirts of the known world this is used to be called the new world this is in a sense proof that the bearing witness to the gospel of Christ worked we do not live in Judea we live across a giant Christ why and believing in Christ why because people bore witness to Christ over centuries and centuries and centuries handing down the faith saying Christ did rise from the grave and it is according to the scriptures and you ought to believe in it because it is life everlasting it is salvation to your souls and here we are it's remarkable the kingdom spreads as we here in this small group in the corner of the world in the new world it's not so new anymore as we bear witness to the risen and ascended king of all even if it costs us earthly glory or maybe our earthly lives for our treasure is no longer in the here and now our true treasure but it is with

Christ Jesus for all of eternity so in fact the very word used for bearing witness to Christ the witness is the same word we use for martyrdom because so convinced were the early disciples and the early church of the literal factual biblical necessary resurrection and ascension of Christ that they bore witness to him and it cost them their lives and that's how we get the term martyr quite remarkable another theologian a guy named Peter Lighthouse says this of Christian martyrdom Christian martyrdom means bearing witness to the truth of the gospel and of God's word especially in the face of intimidation insults exclusion put downs threats Christian martyrs peaceably bear witness to the lordship of Jesus they peaceably confess that

Jesus is lord of lords king of kings ruler of all nations Christian martyrdom is a willingness to follow Jesus all the way to the cross martyrdom doesn't involve killing it's jolly defiance ready to be slandered insulted beaten killed for the one who died for me I want to leave you with two things the first is this the task of bearing witness to Christ Jesus is impossible it is it is an impossible task it's impossible unless we know the risen Christ ourselves and when we do the promise is that the Holy Spirit resides within us but we also must daily pray for strength and courage when we come to faith in Christ the Holy Spirit it does he does he lives within us but the scripture also talks about a continual empowering of the

Spirit in order to live a godly life so Ephesians 5 18 says this do not be drunk with wine for that is debauchery but be filled with the Spirit the idea is not a one time filling of the Spirit a continual filling of the Spirit that is just to say ask God for strength every day and he'll give it to you by his Spirit ask God for courage every day and he will by his Spirit ask God to help you to be excited about God every day and he will by his Spirit it is impossible but it is not impossible for God and he has promised to empower you the second thing I want to leave you with is this we do not we come to this Christian life as individuals we have to take this faith for our own it is not enough that we have these wonderful children baptized and they're growing up in a

Christian home or if your kids aren't baptized that they're growing up in a Christian home and you know I'm Christian because my parents are Christian they have to take on the faith themselves we all have to we come to this faith as individuals but friends we walk it out together we do we can't live out the life that God calls us to as individuals by ourselves there's a famous line in Band of Brothers with Easy Company it says we stand alone together it's just it's so powerful but that's what we're called to do you cannot obey Christ by yourself you can't you need encouragement you need teaching you need somebody to tell you to get your act together sometimes you need somebody to pray for you and to do certain things together and to celebrate in the victories and to mend your wounds so to speak in the losses you're not expected to do this by yourself so it is an impossible task without

[32 : 19] God's help and without the help of your brothers and sisters in the faith and more than anything else so I said two things I'll leave you actually with three things Jesus goes away he ascends into heaven but in Matthew chapter 28 when he gives the great commission he says this all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me go therefore and make disciples of all nations bearing witness to me baptizing them that's all nations in the name of the father and the son and the holy spirit teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you and this is how he ends these last words that he leaves his disciples with in Matthew chapter 28 and behold I am with you always to the end of the age how is Jesus with us to the end of the age if he has ascended into heaven he is not here sitting in a pew he is not there when you are struggling to bear witness to his resurrection and his ascension and his coming again and you fail because it's hard and it's uncomfortable and you have anxiety around it standing up for truth not certain ideologies that come against the scriptures where is he is he there beside you physically the promise of

Jesus to always be with us to the end of the age is rooted and grounded in the giving of his holy spirit to his church so when I encourage everybody to stand up and I walk to the middle of the congregation and I say the Bible or the gospel is read in the middle of the congregation because Christ is truly in our midst it's because he is we don't necessarily see him well we have a wonderful thing to sing so the second line in

Christ our hope in life and death says this what truth can calm the troubled soul God is good God is good where is his grace and goodness known in our great redeemer's blood who holds our faith when fears arise who stands above the stormy trial who sends the waves that bring us nigh and to the shore the rock of Christ when you feel like you cannot do this friends look to the risen Christ when you feel like your faith is faltering look to the risen Christ when you feel like it is an impossible task friends it is look to the risen Christ and he will keep you going and he will empower you it is a crazy life that we claim to live as Christians it is unbelievably outlandish and not it is very counter cultural but friends this is where true life resides this is what it means to live for eternity this is what it means to bear witness to almighty

God that we have something beyond the grave let's pray Lord as we go through the acts of the apostles over the weeks and months ahead father in heaven we pray that the resurrection and the ascension and although we didn't talk about it the coming again of Christ may it be the lens by which we read the entirety of acts that you sent your son to live and die and defeat all of our enemies all of our foes and that he rose again and it is it is it happened it's not an idea it's not some kind of metaphor but he actually rose again and he actually ascended which means he will actually come again Lord let that be the very thing that flavors our reading and also flavors our lives Lord help us to live this impossible task by your spirit by your help and by the help of one another

Lord we pray all these things in Christ's name Amen Amen