

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Easter 7 – Ascension of our Lord
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Sermon by Pastor Gary A. Pufahl
The ascended Lord still serves and sends

I wrote my first book, Theophilus, about everything Jesus began doing and teaching ² until the day he was taken up, after he had given instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. ³ After he had suffered, he presented himself alive to the apostles with many convincing proofs. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and told them things about the kingdom of God.

⁴ Once, when he was eating with them, he commanded them, “Do not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for what the Father promised, which you heard from me. ⁵ For John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

⁶ So when they were together with him, they asked, “Lord, is this the time when you are going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

⁷ He said to them, “It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ But 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.”

⁹ After he said these things, he was taken up while they were watching, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰ They were looking intently into the sky as he went away. Suddenly, two men in white clothes stood beside them. ¹¹ They said, “Men of Galilee, why are you standing here looking up into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”

—Acts 1:1-11 EHV

In my 22 years of ministry as a pastor, I have learned a lot of important lessons about gospel ministry. One of those lessons is that there aren't any shortcuts when it comes to doing ministry in Jesus' kingdom. I'm sure you have noticed that about your own life as a Christian. There just aren't any shortcuts to following Jesus. For those of you who are married, you know that is true in your marriage. It takes work. It's hard. You are constantly working on your communication skills. You are constantly going through the grunt work of loving and respecting, serving and forgiving.

When it comes to Jesus' kingdom and living as members of that kingdom, there just aren't any shortcuts. That's one of the reasons why we have many opportunities for us to grow in our faith here at Emmanuel. For example, a few weeks ago our God's Ways class finished its two years of intensive study. I met with the group 2 years ago, and I told them that this course wasn't going to be easy. Well, when you meet together for 60 sessions over the course of 2 years, and each of those sessions is 2 ½ hours long, that's not easy. It's not easy reading God's Word in your own time and doing the worksheets. It's not easy spending that much time together and faithfully being committed to the work.

But find someone who went through our God's Ways course. Ask them what God did for them during those two years of intensive study. You will be amazed at what God did for his people through that time where there weren't any shortcuts.

You know, that's also true for people who join our ministry at Emmanuel. We require people to go through a Bible Basics course to learn the doctrines of God's Word before joining us as communicant members. In fact, we regularly encourage our members to retake a Bible Basics course because it's so important. It is through time in the Word of God that God unites us in faith and he increases our faith. Our Bible Basics course is 15 weeks long. And I'm sure there are people who ask the question, “Why so long? Can't we just teach them that Jesus loves them and if they love Jesus, then they can join us as communicant members? Why do we need to go through all those doctrines just to express unity in a congregation?”

The same can be said of our youth confirmands. They spend two years studying the basics of the Bible. That's a long time. Why do we invest so much time and energy into teaching and training for membership in this congregation? Well, in my experience, there just aren't any shortcuts to doing this. You see, we even teach our God's Ways graduates or our adult confirmation students or our youth confirmands that what they studied and went through is just a beginning. It's not an end. This is a life-long approach to God's Word. There aren't any shortcuts.

And I'm going to show you why we do that at Emmanuel as we look at the text from the Book of Acts today. I'm actually going to focus on just the first three verses of Acts 1. Saint Luke gives us the context of this book. He

reminds his readers that they are between the two chief parts of Jesus' ministry. The Gospel of Luke talks about Jesus' ministry on earth. It began with Jesus' birth and then his baptism in the Jordan River, and it continued for three years after his baptism ending with his suffering and death.

In fact, Luke summarizes his first volume, his Gospel, with these words from his second volume, the Book of Acts, **"I wrote my first book, Theophilus, about everything Jesus began doing and teaching until the day he was taken up, after he had given instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen."** Just think about what Jesus had been doing with those disciples for three years. It was an intense time of teaching and training. And what a three years it was! The sights and sounds that the disciples witnessed!

What was it like to see Jesus' power right before their eyes? In the middle of a fierce storm, expert fishermen were terrified. Jesus simply says words, "Quiet! Be still!" The wind and waves died down. They witnessed Jesus feeding thousands from just a few loaves of bread and some fish. They saw him heal the sick and raise the dead. His words have power over demons. The demons actually listen to him and have to obey his words.

And his words have power to change hearts and lives. Think about the times when Jesus proclaimed time and time again, **"Repent! The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news."** The disciples sat with Jesus on the side of a hill as Jesus taught words that were challenging. There Jesus told them that unless their righteousness, their right standing before God, exceeded the righteousness of the Pharisees, the most pious people they knew, they could not enter the kingdom that was coming.

Oh, man, what was that like to hear those words? Who then could enter into that kingdom? By our own righteousness, no one could enter the kingdom of God.

But Jesus' teaching centered on the reason he came into the world. It wasn't to make demands that they couldn't fulfill. He came to fulfill those demands for them. He would meet the demands that God's holy law laid upon sinners. He would fulfill the expectations of the prophets when they foretold the Lord's great salvation. Indeed, he was the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world. He would be the necessary sacrifice for their sins.

No shortcuts here. The disciples received a complete training in the three years they spent with Jesus during his earthly ministry. He even gave them a brief time to practice being proclaimers of the kingdom of God. He sent them out to the villages of Galilee so they could experience firsthand the power of Jesus' word at work.

But now that time was over. They were transitioning into a new era. Jesus accomplished his mission. His suffering, death, and resurrection were the culmination of what Jesus came to do. It was now time for Jesus to ascend to the right hand of God, to the position of power and authority. But **the ascended Lord would still serve and send.**

You see, from now on the ascended Lord would continue his ministry through the disciples themselves. Oh, Jesus told them that when he met with them in the Upper Room the day before he died. John writes in his Gospel, chapter 15 what Jesus told his disciples: **"When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father—he will testify about me. And you also are going to testify, because you have been with me from the beginning."**

Things would be different. Now *Jesus'* work was to be *their* work. Now *they* would be his witnesses. They would testify to the world about Jesus. Would they be ready? Yes and no. Oh, they loved Jesus. They were loyal to him, but they also still needed more training and more teaching. Even after Jesus' resurrection from the dead, Jesus thought that they still needed more training and teaching.

Luke tells us, **"After he had suffered, he presented himself alive to the apostles with many convincing proofs. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and told them things about the kingdom of God."** Things were now different. Jesus died and came back to life. And during those 40 days after his resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples on a regular basis. Why?

Well, first of all, he wanted them to know with certainty that he was physically alive. He ate with his disciples. He allowed them to touch his wounds. There was no doubt that Jesus was physically alive. They were witnesses of that fact.

But during those 40 days, Jesus also used that time for instruction. While Jesus was in this world, he regularly talked about the kingdom of God. And his teaching wasn't so much about a place as it was about an activity. Luke tells us that Jesus **"appeared to them over a period of forty days and told them things about the kingdom of God."**

What do you suppose Jesus told them? I'm sure he told them they were going to be disappointed if they were expecting a kingdom of splendor in this world with earthly boundaries where Jesus would reign with great glory and might. I'm sure he reminded them of what he told Pontius Pilate, that his kingdom was not a kingdom of this world,

but rather a kingdom where the truth of salvation was proclaimed and where that truth resided in the hearts of its citizens.

I'm sure Jesus taught them that he was going to the Father to prepare a place for them. I'm sure Jesus taught them that he would not leave them alone, but he would send the Spirit to further teach them. No shortcuts here. They needed more teaching and training.

Jesus was ascending to the right hand of God, a position of power and authority, but his kingdom activity would not end with his ascension. No. **The ascended Lord is still serving and sending.** It's just that it will be a little different. He would now do it through his disciples as the Spirit continued the teaching and training.

The disciples would continue the ministry of proclaiming the gospel that Jesus had begun, and when they did, the kingdom of God would continue to come near to sinners. What Jesus had told his disciples behind locked doors on Easter evening must have been a message he hammered home to them during these forty days: **"The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. Look, I am sending you what my Father promised. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high"** (Luke 24:46-49).

After forty days of intense teaching about the kingdom of God, the disciples were ready. Jesus sent them, empowered by the Holy Spirit, to proclaim the good news. And that mission continues even to this day.

In a few weeks from now we will discuss the mission that Christ has given to his church, the mission that he has given to you and me. But today I just want to place upon you the reason why we spend so much time and energy in teaching and training.

That's how Jesus operates. He didn't take any shortcuts with his disciples in teaching and training them. And he doesn't take any shortcuts with us. That's why we spend so much time and energy in teaching and training. There aren't any shortcuts, and thank God that's true. Because it's through the grueling study of God's Word, no shortcuts, that the Lord serves us the best.

As I close my sermon with you today, can I give you some examples of what the Lord has done in the lives of his people through the intense study of God's Word through our God's Ways course? Here are some words from people:

This course has been extremely helpful and valuable. It has changed the way I view life's ups and downs. Being in God's Word has offered comfort when life does not go as planned. It has also given me confidence to speak to other people about God.

This course has definitely strengthened my faith. I have a stronger awareness and appreciation for God's spiritual blessings. I walk away from this course being able to witness for Christ more confidently. Daily I find myself being very thankful for all of God's earthly and especially spiritual blessings.

I believe that this course has taught me to be a better person as far as my feelings toward other people. I believe I have become a more patient and considerate person, trying not to judge people negatively. God has blessed me by showing me through his Word to be a better Christian and love people as he has loved me.

It is so humbling to me to see how **the ascended Lord is still serving and sending today.** We teach. We preach. We train. Not for just a little while, but for our entire lives. Expect it. Treasure it. We do this because it fulfills an important role in the mission of proclaiming God's kingdom. Amen.