Endings and beginnings—life is full of both. A month from retiring from the newspaper, I felt this keenly, but what I found was that life opened up a whole new beginning for me after I ended my vocation as a publisher. Becoming a priest presented a new world for me, and new experiences continue to fill my life. Who could have guessed that half of my time as your rector I would be doing worship services online? Who could have imagined that digging up newsworthy information would become a part of my weekly job as a priest? I would never have thought that I would be the person starting a Godaddy web site when I had had personal tech people manage this part of the newspaper business for 15 years. Nothing speaks to new beginnings better than Jesus ascending to heaven, or wherever the Father, Jesus and the Holy Spirit are hanging out.

They say that the first sentence of a novel is the hardest to write. I wouldn’t personally know this myself, but I have heard it stated. But endings are even more difficult. The question is, how to end a long story? Daniel James Brown ends The BOYS in the BOAT with “A new, deeper level of quiet settles over the room. And then he begins to tell the story.” The Color of Compromise: *The Truth about the American Church’s Complicity in Racism* by Jemar Tisby finishes his book with, “It is time to practice courageous Christianity.” "Michelle Obama ends her book, *Becoming*, with three dynamic sentences, “There’s power in allowing yourself to be known and heard, in owning your unique story.” Perhaps the most suggestive ending for today’s Scripture readings is the last line of Samuel Beckett's The Unnamable: "…you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on."

For Luke, the ascension is the last line of the Jesus story, for it is where his gospel ends. This strange account of Jesus' rapture into heaven leaves us with strangely otherworldly feelings—especially for a worldly writer like Luke. Was the ascension a literal event, or was it the only way Luke could imagine Jesus' departure? After all, you couldn't have the Christ riding into the sunset, Lone Ranger style, with the bystanders asking, "Who was that masked man?" You couldn't have Jesus die at the end of the story, for he had already died once and defeated death. And so, we read that Jesus floats upward, presumably toward heaven.

Although Luke treats the ascension as the end of the gospel story, a second telling of this event actually begins his next book, the book of Acts. His chronology is even different; in Luke the ascension takes place on Easter afternoon, just after the encounter on the road to Emmaus. But in the first chapter of Acts it takes place forty days after Easter. Be that as it may, perhaps Luke is telling us something important about Jesus' departure: that it is both an ending and a beginning.

The ascension is, of course, an ending. Those feet that walked the dusty roads of Palestine will not walk the earth again. The feet so lovingly anointed just before the crucifixion will no longer carry him to the sites of miracles and healings. This is goodbye. The Jesus story in Luke's gospel comes to an end.

And yet…turn to Acts, and the same scene, although with different timing, is the beginning of another story—the story of the church. In the Acts reading Luke seems to take a different tack, turning back to the world again. Now the emphasis is on what to do now. In both scenes, Jesus "opens the scriptures," just as he had done for the two followers on the road to Emmaus, giving final instructions. But in Acts,when his disciples ask about the schedule of future events, Jesus reminds them "It is not for you to know the times…" The implication is that the business of the new foundling church will not be to indulge in speculation about the eschaton or wondering what the end of times will look like. Instead, we are to continue the work of the kingdom.

It's notable that after Jesus is "taken up" in a cloud and the Acts onlookers stare at those ascending feet, two men in white appear (I wonder if they are the same men who showed up in Luke's version of the resurrection with their question, "Why do you seek the living among the dead?"), and say, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" These angels ask hard questions! The implication is, “Don't just stand there, do something! And so the story of the church begins.”

Jesus bluntly tells the onlookers before ascending, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set 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, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

These new converts in the Acts reading have a job to do …. They are to be witnesses of what they saw happen while they were with Jesus. Theologians continue to bring forth their ideas on whether the resurrection and ascension is a literal event, but I take the position that something occurred way beyond the norm, both with the resurrection and with Jesus ascending upwards, so who am I to doubt these words by Luke.

I wonder if the Christian church would be in crisis right now if we had taken these words written by Luke literally, and did the simple, yet, difficult task of figuring out how to be a witness for Jesus. There is a certain authenticity when the ‘buck’ stops at your door as a Christian, and each of us try to answer the question, “How am I a witness to the life of Jesus?” If I am not a witness to the life of Jesus, then why not?” Brian McClaren made this statement at a conference in Britain titled, “The Case for God,” He says, “We wonder what has happened since we went to sleep in the name of God.” He says we need to talk about what version of God or Jesus we witness. McClaren targets the idea of using the methodology of Science with our Christian understanding of God. He says, “Science posits a theory, and then continues to critique those theories, and replacing them when a better theory comes to view. We have to ask ourselves, “Is our faith equipped for the same capacity as science?” Can Christians critique their version of Christianity as scientists do? And would giving more thought to our version of Christianity help us be a better witness for Jesus?

It is interesting to me that the first Christians were persecuted for atheism, because they refused to believe in the Greek and Roman pantheon. In spite of the persecution the first followers of Jesus encountered, their witness of Jesus formed a new belief in God, they did something amazing with their new belief, they relied upon the Holy Spirit to guide them in sharing the story of Jesus.

So, if we were a Christian using the science methodology to study our belief in Jesus, I wonder how many different theories we would have gone through during our lifetime. Do you see how this would have kept the witness of Jesus fresh and real and lively? For Luke’s ending is also the beginning of his 2nd volume of writing found in Acts. Luke was using a scientific approach to being a witness to Jesus. The early Christians made decisions based on the Spirit of God showing them where to go from town to town. Paul even says to the Athenians, I will be whatever you need me to be, if you claim Jesus as being God.”

We are called to be witnesses to Jesus. Let’s make sure we are renewing our ideas about Jesus? We may be surprised how the Holy Spirit will revive our vision of God. Amen.