**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

These two stories of the Ascension that we have heard this evening – like the two Genesis Creation stories – express aspects of the same essential truth.

The Acts version tells how Jesus promised the Holy Spirit to his Apostles, then went up into heaven and two men in white appeared and asked: why are you looking for him. He’ll come back the same way he went. And we are told the disciples then set about the practical business of replacing Judas in the twelve. Getting on with the job Jesus had tasked them with.

And then Luke’s gospel tells about Jesus coming to the disciples and saying Peace be with you. Even after all his resurrection appearances, they STILL think they are seeing a ghost. Once more, he patiently proves to them that he is real, this time by eating fish. He opens their minds (remember how he explained the scriptures to the travellers on the Emmaus Road) so they understand finally how everything fits together. Then he blesses them and leaves – whereupon they worship him and show great joy… Not quite the reaction of grief and distress we might have expected.

Luke tells us: Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures. With these few words Luke describes a truly transformative event. Suddenly it all made sense. Jesus had told them over and over that he had not come to overthrow God’s covenant but to fulfil it.

Exactly as promised, then, Jesus ascended into heaven. The scriptures were fulfilled. The Redeemer had returned to the Father as he said he would.

How many times had he tried to tell this to these uneducated manual labourers? How many times had they struggled to understand? Now they got it. Now they had the wisdom and in a few days they would have the will… when Jesus sent down the Holy Spirit… to harness their new found knowledge and go out into the world to carry on his work … to change the world. (back to the Acts version again – they needed enough bodies to do the work – just as we do today).

The Bible that grew out of this imparted wisdom is not some disjointed collection of random stories; it is an integrated account of God’s covenant with his creation, divided into old and new testaments, yet united in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. And the more we read it, the more we discover new threads in the web. But most of all we discover that it is not the disciples’ story; it is our story.

When we get beyond a certain age, many of us seem to lose our understanding of the importance of stories. When I am looking for rubbish to read on my Kindle, one of my criteria has become ‘must have at least 300 pages’ – it feels like 300 pages must be worth the 99pence I am prepared to pay. But the author Daniel Wallace on one occasion convinced me otherwise. His novel, Big Fish, has only 192 pages but its full title is Big Fish: a novel of mythic proportions. It tells the story of a father’s quest to be a big fish. When it was made into a film, the director Tim Burton said of it: *Big Fish* is about what's real and what's fantastic, what's true and what's not true, what's partially true and how, in the end, it's all true.

In a nutshell: Edward Bloom was a mere travelling salesman, but he lived in a state of constant aspiration. And told these wild tales to his enthralled son about his adventures through life. Remembering a man’s stories makes him immortal, he said at one point. … And stories help us to make sense of the world around us. Cutting a long story short, William, the son, is increasingly irritated by Edward’s stories, which he redefines as ‘lies’ and they are estranged.

Three years on, with a wife of his own and expecting a baby, William is called to Edward’s deathbed. He finds him only partly conscious. Since Edward can no longer tell stories, he asks Will to tell him the story of how his life ends. Will decides to play along and tells his own tall tale, in which Edward regains his strength, and he and Will escape from the hospital. They shoot off in Edward's old car to a nearby river, where all their family and friends are waiting, and instead of a funeral, they hold a goodbye party; Edward waves goodbye, transforms into a catfish and swims away. Satisfied with the story, he then duly dies.

At the funeral, his son, wife and daughter in law, with the doctor, are initially the only ones present. But then a great stream of cars, vans and buses arrives and Will is amazed to see all of the characters from Edward's stories turning up to pay their respects. They all existed; just in slightly less fantastical form that Edward had portrayed them.

It finally becomes clear that Edward had combined his love of storytelling with his own sense of what is real, which finally makes sense to Will. He receives that gift of understanding; about how stories express meaning, understanding, depth and love.

In a similar way, as Jesus left his disciples, the disciples had learned to tell the story, back in their cities, in their temples, and everywhere else.

The whole of Biblical witness points to the telling of stories, to passing on the good news of Jesus' love for all people.  
  
So how shall we tell the story? What is important for us in the gospel, and how does it shape us, and thence shape the world?

We are certainly learning to tell the story differently in these times: by loving service to others and by reaching out with technology, we express in word and action our own story of Christ, risen, ascended, glorified.

**Amen**