

Wesley United Methodist Church
Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
May 28, 2017
Ascension Day
Text: Acts 1:1-14
Luke 24:44-53
Title: Open The Eyes of Our Hearts

When I hear the scriptures for today and especially the sections about Jesus being taken up into heaven, I can't help but think about the Star Wars shows and Captain Kirk when he wanted to return to his space ship saying, "Beam me up, Scottie." His body would transform into digital dots and he would disappear and rematerialize on the Spaceship Enterprise.

It would be easy to get caught up in the words of today's scripture and try to imagine what this would look like; what happened to Jesus' body and where he ended up, but then we would risk missing the point of this important day.

The season of Lent is 40 days long (minus the Sundays) from Ash Wednesday until Easter. It is a time of preparation for Jesus' crucifixion, death, and resurrection. As Dan explained to the children last week, Easter is more than one day – it is an entire season – 50 days long from Easter Eve until Pentecost – which is next Sunday. The Easter Season focuses on the resurrection and ascension and on the giving of the Holy Spirit.

Near the end of the Easter season – 40 days after Easter – is Ascension – it is the sixth Thursday after Easter (3 days ago) and in the early church was considered a very special holy day – even more so than Christmas. I have chosen today to focus on Ascension rather than on the 7th Sunday of Easter because I believe the message of the Ascension is critical to our faith journey.

Ascension is important because on the day of the ascension, the disciples were promised that even though Jesus was leaving their physical presence, the power of the Holy Spirit would come and be with them – and us – and give us strength. On the day of the ascension, the disciples were given their commission – their marching orders about how to carry on. And thirdly at the ascension we are told that God is in charge of history and the ultimate end is sure.

Luke's gospel ends with the story of the ascension, and the Acts of the Apostles, written by the same person, begins with this story. "The story of the last time the disciples saw Jesus is a story of blessing. Jesus says that as witnesses to his presence and resurrection, they too will be filled with power to carry on his ministry, to be his hands and feet in the world. To see the world through the eyes of Jesus is to see through the eyes of love."ⁱ

Think for a minute, if you will, about what the disciples had been through during the last three years. They were all good Jewish men, living their lives in the best ways they knew how. Jesus walked into their lives and everything changed. Suddenly they were leaving their fishing nets and other means of living and following Jesus. They watched and listened as he taught and healed. They struggled with questions. They came to believe that he was the Messiah for whom the Jews had been waiting. And then things turned nasty. In one week, he went from being welcomed with palm branches and shouts from the crowd for him to save them to being put on trial, and crucified like a common criminal. Their grief was overwhelming.

But while they were still processing their grief, they suddenly learned that he was alive again. For the next 40 days, from time to time he would

appear to them and teach them more about the Kingdom of God. They were still confused and in today's reading from Acts we hear that they asked him, "Is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" In our limited human minds, despite all that Jesus had told them, despite all that had happened, these things had served only to reinforce to them the idea that a messiah was coming to overthrow the Roman government and to restore the kingdom of Israel.

They were in for yet another mind boggling and life changing event. Once again Jesus told them to stay in Jerusalem until they received the power of the Holy Spirit and that when they had received that power they would no longer be afraid, they would no longer hide in a room behind locked doors, but they would receive power and would witness to all that they had heard, seen, experienced, and questioned not only in Jerusalem among their own people, but also in all Judea and Samaria among people who were different than them, and then even to the ends of the earth to people who would have no idea what they were talking about.

They returned to Jerusalem – Luke tells us that they were constantly in the temple worshipping God with great joy. The transformation was beginning – they were no longer hiding behind locked doors, but openly worshipping. In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke tells us that during this time they were in Jerusalem – the eleven remaining disciples, along with Mary Jesus' mother, his brothers and other women – and they were devoting themselves to prayer. They have been blessed by Jesus as he prepared to leave them and return to God and their lives have begun to change as a result of that blessing. There is no more fishing or going back to what was familiar, no more fear of the authorities, and no more hiding. This marks the moment beyond which the disciples are never the same.

The story continues – Jesus lives on in the church through the Holy Spirit who fills us with courage and strength. Jesus lives on in the church – in us – through the commission he gave his disciples to be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the world.

Matthew describes this event a little differently – and we will hear more about that in two weeks when our youth make their confirmation. In Matthew's gospel Jesus tells them to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

The good news of the Ascension is the reminder that Jesus not only comes from God but returns to God as do we all. The challenge for us in the meantime is to keep our lives focused on God, to be centered in God, rooted and growing in God in all that we say and do and are.

The good news is that God works through the simplest of people. Jesus' disciples were not members of the ruling class. They were not wealthy men of power. They were peasants, fishermen, outcasts, skilled or day laborers. They were normal everyday men who were afraid of change and yet became the ones through whom God would change the world.

Jesus stays with them long enough to be able to pass them off to the Holy Spirit who will continue the work that Jesus has begun in and among them. They are about to find their voices. They will begin to speak truth to power and to spread good news to the very ends of the earth.ⁱⁱ

At first the disciples stood looking off into heaven looking for Jesus; but they were soon reminded that they should not spend their time looking for Jesus but returning to Jerusalem and being about the work to which they were being commissioned.

That is a reminder to me as I read the news and listen to what is happening in Washington and around the world. It reminds me that even though I may not think that I can make a difference, that even though I am not a wealthy person and do not have great power as the world sees it – in God’s eyes I am a person of value – a person who can be used by God to make a difference. It reminds me that it is important for me to make my voice heard and that many voices together make a difference. It reminds me, not to get caught up in the arguments of politics but to view those political arguments through the eyes of God, through the lens of love and compassion, justice, and peace. It reminds me to stay rooted, grounded and growing in the soil in which God has planted me and to grow from that soil and bear fruit.

I was also reminded as I prepared for today that Jesus gathered his disciples as a community; he taught them as a community, he left from the midst of the community, and when they returned to Jerusalem they stayed together as a community. The spirit was promised to come to them in community.ⁱⁱⁱ Certainly we do have experiences as individuals, but sometimes I think we have placed so much emphasis on religion being a personal experience that we are reluctant to talk about it with others. Jesus makes it clear that it is the Holy Spirit working in community that will spread the good news around the world. That is still the challenge for us today – to be a community of faith, Spirit-filled, and spreading the good news. This is our challenge and our commission as the body of Christ.

It is not easy work. It wasn’t for the disciples and it isn’t today. When Jesus said that they would witness not only in Jerusalem, but also in Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth he was making a point about the wideness and inclusiveness of God’s love and grace that was a stumbling

block for some back then and sadly, continues to be a stumbling block today. In a dramatic experience, Peter discovered that God does not show partiality, but that all persons of all nations are acceptable to God when they turn to God.

Throughout history, the church led by humans has struggled to understand this truth, and churches have split over who is acceptable to God and who is not and what role various groups of people should have within the church. Sadly the debates continue today in many places and in many ways. We no longer speak about Gentiles and Jews, but the groups that are often excluded are still real and the arguments are still too often based on someone's understanding of what they think the Bible says.

Our work is not easy but fortunately we are not left to our own devices in this challenging work of witness. I am excited to have the youth choir from Georgia leading our worship next week but in some ways, I regret that it is next week because I would love to preach about the Holy Spirit coming upon the disciples at Pentecost. Ironically, the first time I preached on Pentecost was in this sanctuary when Ruth Robinson was the pastor and Pentecost was the about the last Sunday that I wanted to have to preach. My understanding of Pentecost and the Holy Spirit has changed a lot in the intervening years and now I am sorry that I don't get to preach on Pentecost.

That, in itself, is a witness to what the Holy Spirit does in our lives. We are not left alone, and through the years, the Holy Spirit works in our lives in ways we often do not recognize at the time. The Holy Spirit helps us become witnesses as preachers, as teachers, as friends and companions on the journey.

Our work is not easy because the Loving God we proclaim is constantly taking our understanding of power and turning it upside down, but then what else should we expect from a God who allowed love to triumph through the life and ministry of a human being who finally was tortured and killed because of the ways he loved and who he loved.

But even then, God turned everything upside down and death did not have the last word. This is a powerful witness to how powerful God's love really is. It does not always translate well into a world where the inclusion and integration of love is rejected by models that require people to be marginalized and objectivized so that the privilege of a few can be maintained.^{iv} But this is the model of Love that we are called to bear witness to and to do so not only here in Jerusalem, but also in Judea, Samaria and even to the ends of the earth.

In some churches, there is a strong debate about where ministry and mission should take place – whether it should be focused on our local setting, our neighborhood and the people who are part of our community, or whether it should extend to people we do not know halfway around the world. The scripture, in my understanding, makes it clear that the answer is yes, to both. We are to be in ministry, mission, and witness in Jerusalem, and also in Judea, Samaria and even to the ends of the earth.

I want to close by sharing words that are attributed to St. Teresa of Avila – words that remind us that the commission to witness is for all of us today. She is credited with saying, “Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which the compassion of Christ is to look out on a hurting world. Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good. Yours are the hands with which he is to bless now.”

My friends, it is up to us – you and me. There is no other plan. There is no other way that people will learn about God’s love and what a difference that has made in the life of the world and in our lives, both as individuals and as a community. It is up to us to be the witnesses for today.

ⁱ Worship Design Studio, Synopsis “The Heart of the Matter”

ⁱⁱ Feasting on the Word, Year A Volume 2, Ascension, Pastoral commentary

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid

^{iv} Ibid