

Wesley United Methodist Church

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A Place to Call Home

Title: Always Blessing, Always Blessed

Scripture: Acts 1:1-11

Ephesians 1:15-23

Luke 24:44-53

Many of you are old enough to remember the Star Trek series. When I hear today's scriptures about Jesus ascending to heaven, lifted up and a cloud taking him out of their sight, I think about Captain Kirk saying to his chief of engineering, "Beam me up, Scotty." His body would transform into digital dots and he would rematerialize on the deck of the Starship 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.

Early Christians considered Ascension Day to be a high holy day – even more important than Christmas. Ascension can be easy for us modern Christians to overlook, since it is 40 days after Easter – always falling on a Thursday - so, we often take the Sunday afterwards as a day to look at the Ascension.

Ascension is really important to us, because it really does mark the end of Jesus being physically seen by his disciples. It marks the time when they received their marching orders – the plan that was and is to carry believers into the future.

Let's think for a minute about what the disciples had experienced. In a six-week period, they had lost their best friend, the one they had believed would save Israel from Rome. They had been afraid for their lives because

they were associated with Jesus. Then they had been astounded by his return. While they were still trying to figure this out, Jesus challenged them to share his message with a hostile world and now suddenly they see him disappear into the sky. A person can only handle so much change, upset, confusion, emotion in a short period of time.

One of the commentators I read this week, talked about the disciples having “resurrection lenses” or given the oral tradition of Jesus’ teaching and methods, “resurrection ears”.ⁱ The “resurrection lenses” caught my attention. Following two cataract surgeries, I’m trying to get used to seeing things in a different way. I’m trying to get used to not wearing glasses when I drive but being unable to read anything on a computer or in my hand unless I have glasses on. It changes the way I have functioned for most of my life. The doctor who did the surgery insists that I will get used to it and love it. He may be right, but it’s a big adjustment.

The disciples were facing an infinitely bigger adjustment. Jesus’ death, resurrection, and now ascension changed everything. They were still holding onto a world view where Jesus, the Messiah, was going to come and save Israel, free it from domination. Even after he had taught them again everything he had been saying to them before his death, they still asked, “Is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” Old ways of looking at the world, old worldviews are hard to overcome.

The commentator I was reading wrote, “They may have ‘resurrection ears,’ but they do not have transformed ‘ascension minds’ to understand that Jesus’ ascension is his kingly rise and that this is good news for the whole world.”ⁱⁱ

“Ascension minds” something very different. Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, and ascension being good for the whole world – not just for

Israel? Jesus telling them that they would receive power to do this – power that was greater than what they had on their own. Jesus telling them that this power – the Holy Spirit – would help them be witnesses not only in Jerusalem but also in Judea, Samaria and even to the ends of the earth. This was definitely not typical Jewish thinking. Jews and Samaritans did not associate with each other.

Luke tells us in Acts that when Jesus left them, they stood gazing up into heaven. Two men in white robes – hear “angels”- stood by them and asked why they were looking up into heaven. “This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” Well, to my mind that could be affirmation to keep staring off into heaven looking for Jesus to return, but “ascension minds” understand that there is more here than meets the eye. The worldview and previous assumptions will have to be shaken loose. A new foundation will have to be laid for the Kingdom of God. It will not be simply “restoring the kingdom to Israel”.

So, the question the men, or angels, are asking, is “Will you do as Jesus, the ascended ruler of the whole world commanded?”ⁱⁱⁱ Will you go back to Jerusalem and wait for the power of the Holy Spirit to come to you? Will you then go, and be witnesses not only in Jerusalem, but also in Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth? Or, understood differently, will you be witnesses not only in your own house with your friends and family, and in your own church with people with whom you feel comfortable, but will you be witnesses in Lincoln, Pawtucket, Central Falls, and also in Providence, Warwick, Westerly, even in Connecticut, California, and all the way to Canada, Mexico, Korea, Iran, Iraq, Africa, Australia, anywhere and everywhere that God sends you? That kind of changes things doesn't it?

Are you protesting, but I can't do that? Well, for those of us who start to feel scared at the prospects, the likelihood is that God is not going to ask most of us to physically go to most of those places. The other really good news is that if God is asking you to go to those places, God will send the Holy Spirit to prepare you so that it is not so scary, so unthinkable. I believe strongly that God prepares us for what we are called to do.

Many years ago, when I lived in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, we had a missionary speak at our church one day. Most of us were moved by what he had to say. We made monetary donations to help support the mission and we went on our merry way. But not John and Donna. John and Donna had three children. They had been married for a quite awhile and their lives were settled quite nicely thank you.

John went home from church that day and went downstairs to his work room where he had a long discussion with God. He argued with God, he was sure that he was hearing the message wrong. Certainly, God couldn't be asking him to pick up and move his family somewhere half way around the world. He was not a person who was comfortable talking about his faith, he was a carpenter who liked to work with his hands, so how could God be asking him to be a missionary. It just made no sense all and besides Donna would never go for it. Donna was the "church lady", not John. She would think he was crazy.

Meanwhile, Donna was up in the kitchen preparing dinner, grateful that John seemed to have disappeared and that the children were outside because Donna was having her own discussion with God. Donna was a teacher and she could see that her teaching might be useful somewhere in the mission field; but she had three children. She knew John would never ever consider anything like this.

Eventually John made his way to the kitchen. He looked at Donna, and said, “You are going to think I’m crazy, but I think God wants me to become a missionary.” I still get the goosebumps I had when Donna shared that story with our Bible study group. God had been working in both of their lives. The Holy Spirit prepared both of them. It was, and is, one of the most amazing call stories I have ever heard. It took time, but John and Donna and a couple of their children ended up working with a Bible translation group. Donna taught the children of the other people on the team. John’s carpentry skills were greatly in demand in the area and was the way God was calling him to mission. The church members rallied around them and their call and helped in a thousand different ways as together everyone participated in his or her own way in responding to that call.

The family with whom their oldest child lived to finish out high school was as much a part of that call as the people who collected supplies, helped to raise money to support them, helped them make arrangements for the care of their farm while they were gone and responded in so many different ways. The call was not just to John and Donna but to all of us.

The ascension of Jesus is a powerful affirmation that Jesus, the Jewish rabbi was Christ the redeemer and the Lord of the universe. The basic meaning of Ascension Day is that Jesus Christ is not only a human prophet, teacher and healer who dwelt on earth two thousand years ago, but he is also the transcendent Christ, who came from God, who returned to God to reign over all creation and will come again in glory. When, where, how, is not for us to know. What is for us to know is that today, we are Christ’s hands and feet on this earth. We are the ones who are to carry the good news to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth.

We, the people who are afraid to speak about our faith and we, the people, who are eager to share out faith. We, the people who have lots of money and resources to help and we, the people who don't know where our next meal is coming from and struggle to pay this month's rent. We, the people who have many talents and can easily see ourselves being used by God in some important way and we, the people who think we have no abilities, that there is nothing we can do to for God. We, the people, who have lived charmed lives and are happy with the way our lives are going, and we, the people, who cry ourselves to sleep at night because of our deep grief, or fear or....

The message of Ascension is that God would send the Holy Spirit to us and this Holy Spirit would help us see the world not only with "resurrection lenses" but also with "ascension minds".

Luke tells us that Jesus was blessing his disciples when he "withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the temple blessing God."

They didn't go out witnessing immediately. If they were listening to Jesus, they might have been very happy with his instruction that they were to return to Jerusalem and stay there until they were clothed with power from on high – until the Holy Spirit came upon them. I'm thinking that they didn't really have any idea what that meant, but they probably grasped hold of the idea that they were to stay in the city until whatever was supposed to happen did.

However, they also didn't go back into hiding. They were out and about in the city. They were in the temple with great frequency – "continually" Luke says. They were filled with great joy. And they were

blessing or praising and worshipping God. The blessings that Jesus had bestowed on them before “withdrawing” from them continued as his followers spent time in the temple in worship.

Each time we gather to worship and to bless God, each time we gather to remember others in our prayers, we, too are continually at home in the presence of Jesus Christ’s presence among us. We are always blessing others as we hold them in prayer and as we respond to the many ways that God calls us to be a blessing to others in the world. It is a faith truth that as we are blessing others, we are also blessed. As we are blessed, we want to bless others. So, it is an ever expanding circle of being blessed by God, blessing others, being blessed, blessing others, being blessed.

The calls in our lives are as diverse as we are. Some are called to teach, some to be medical persons, some to be administrators, some to listen to people, some to provide transportation, some to care for children, some to care for older persons. There is no limit to the ways in which God calls us, no limits to the ways the Holy Spirit works in our lives. It is different for each of us, but there is a call to each of us.

All of us are called to be witnesses in Jerusalem – in the places close to us, in the places we are comfortable. All of us are called to be witnesses in Judea – the places a little further away from us, but still with people mostly like us. All of us are called to be witnesses in Samaria – the places where people are very different than us, the places we probably don’t want to be. All of us are called to be witnesses to the ends of the earth. There is no limit to where we are called to be witnesses, and no limit to the ways we are called to witness, although it will look different for each of us.

What is the same is that the call is to each and every one of us, and if we are open to the leading of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we will discover that we are always blessing, and we are always being blessed.

Let me close with the sentiment of the letter to the Ephesians. “I know of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God’s people. This is the reason that I don’t stop giving thanks to God for you when I remember you in my prayers. I pray that God will give you a spirit of wisdom and understanding that makes God known to you. I pray that the eyes of your heart will have enough light to see the hope of God’s call and the overwhelming greatness of God’s power working among us.”^{iv} Amen.

ⁱ Abingdon Preaching Annual 2018, p.63

ⁱⁱ Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid

^{iv} Paraphrase of Ephesians 1:15-19 CEB