

Wesley United Methodist Church      Rev. Beverly E Stenmark  
June 2, 2019 – Ascension Sunday  
Title: Embodied – By A Loving God  
Scripture: Acts 1:1-11  
Luke 24:44-53

Ascension Day was a major festival in the early life of the Christian Church. In fact, in the early church, it was considered even more important than Christmas. However, because it is 40 days after Easter, it is always a Thursday and it can be easy to overlook it in the life of the church. So sometimes we take the Sunday after Ascension Day to focus on it because it marks a real transition in the life of the early disciples and of the church.

In the 40 days after Easter, Jesus appeared to his disciples at many times and in many ways. He was trying to teach them what it would be like for them to be disciples when he was no longer with them. Ascension Day marks the last moment when the disciples would be with a Jesus that they could physically see and talk with. One indication of how important the Ascension celebration was to the early church is the amount of art that depicts the Ascension.

When I think about Ascension, I tend to think of Captain Kirk on the Star Trek shows saying, “Beam me up, Scotty”. His body would then transform into digital dots and he would rematerialize on the deck of the Star Ship Enterprise.

It would be easy to get caught up in the details of what really happened on that day, but then we run the risk of getting side-tracked and missing what is most important about Christ’s ascension. Ascension is 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.

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.

The reading from Acts tells us that Jesus had spent the 40 days talking to his disciples about the Kingdom of God. This is one of those classic situations of people meaning and understanding different things when they hear the same word or phrase. When Jesus talks about the Kingdom of God, he talks God's hope for the world that is not yet fully realized, a time of loving, trusting and a just relationship with God as the focus and the center of life. The disciples were still thinking about the Kingdom of God as Israel getting out from under Roman oppression and Israel being in charge. The disciples are still focused on the practical – they want clarification. They ask if this is the time when he will restore the kingdom to Israel.

They were still looking for Jesus to tie up all the loose ends, to bring closure to what he had been doing – to finally fulfill their expectations of who the Messiah would be and what he would do. Instead, Jesus left them with a lot of unfinished business. He left them without completing the work that they expected him to do.

Laura Truax, a pastor in Illinois, says that when she reads this passage, she has a flashback to Saturday mornings of her childhood. Her dad would take her and her younger brother in his truck out to a remote section of their 50-acre farm. He would give them instructions on what they were to do – weeding, fertilizing, planting, painting – then he'd show them the way he wanted it done.

She said, he would hand them a bucket of supplies, and then just drive off. She writes, "He'd just leave us, expecting us to complete the work he'd left us to do by the time he would return. So, I get in my bones, why the disciples stood there gazing up at the sky, and why they had to be nudged into action. Because sometimes, standing there is just what you do, when you don't want to believe what's happening."<sup>i</sup>

Jesus' disciples stood there. Jesus had not completed the work. He had died before and then come back again. Would he suddenly reappear? They didn't know what to do. They had to be nudged back into action. They had to be reminded of what to do.

Jesus had left them with a lot of unfinished work, but he had also given them some tools to use as they went about the work that was left for them. Those same tools and instructions have been given to us as well.

First, Jesus told them that they would have power. They would not be doing this work alone. The Holy Spirit would come and empower them. Next week is Pentecost and we will hear the amazing story from Acts of the Holy Spirit coming upon them and empowering them in surprising ways.

Both of our scripture readings today described Jesus' ascension. We believe that the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles were both written by the same author. Tradition says this was Luke, who is described as a beloved physician, and someone who traveled with Paul on some of

his missionary journeys. Luke's gospel ends with the story of the ascension and the Acts of the Apostles begins with the same event.

There is a sort of prologue or summary of what took place before; it's kind of like a sequel to a movie or part 2 of a show beginning with the words, "Earlier on ..." The ascension is a major shift in focus. It ends Jesus' earthly ministry, and it begins the new chapter of the Holy Spirit empowering people to carry out this ministry into the future. So, the disciples are told that they will have power when the Holy Spirit comes among them.

The second tool to help them figure out what to do next is that they are given a job. "you shall be my witnesses". This is part of where Pastor Laura Truax connects. It's a big job. It seems too big to be possible. "Leaving thousands of miles of plain work in front of them – endless fields to be seeded, planted, watered, and harvested."<sup>ii</sup> At times like this, it is easy to get caught up in the enormity of a task and be unable to begin.

But Jesus gave them one small piece of strategy. They should start in Jerusalem, then Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the world. It's an ever-widening circle but it begins where they are – where we are. We are now Christ's body here on earth – and we are left with a large unfinished task. People have been working on it for years, but the task continues. People continue to be born and need to hear about Jesus.

On Friday, I sat in the back pew here and listened to the children from the nursery school rehearse for their end of the year program. I watched 31 children ages 3-5, standing here at the front of our sanctuary singing songs about how Jesus loved them, and about how they love Jesus. I watched their energy and enthusiasm and had hope for 31 little ones who are learning early in their lives that they are precious to God.

I hope that they will remember this and carry it with them into their lives. I hope that they will always remember and believe that God loves them and that they will share this with others. At the same time, I know far too many adults who do not really know that God loves them.

Sometimes they knew but have forgotten. Sometimes something has happened in their lives that have caused them to forget, or to question God's love. Sometimes people, claiming to speak for God, have told them things that have caused them to reject God's love and any possibility that God can be acting in their lives.

The work still before us is huge, but like the disciples we need to be careful not to spend our time staring off into the distance looking for a miracle, expecting someone else to do the job that has been given to each and every one of us. We are each called to be witnesses for Christ in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

Jerusalem, to the disciples, meant those people with whom they lived and worked every day. People who were like them, had similar values and backgrounds. Judea were those who were a little bit further away; people who were a little different. Samaria would have been the real concern. The Samaritans were those who we prefer to think of as the "other", the people we would prefer not to have to associate with, people we would prefer not to see, people who are very different than 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 our 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....”<sup>iii</sup>

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.

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.”<sup>iv</sup> Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Hoezee, Scott. Editor. The Abingdon Preaching Annual 2019, p.62. Resources for June 2, 2019 – Ascension Day

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid

<sup>iii</sup> These two paragraphs come from my sermon for last year. I do not know if the words are all original or if parts of them may have come from another source. If so, I suspect that it might have come from resources in the Worship Design Studio series on “A Place to Call Home”

<sup>iv</sup> Paraphrase of Ephesians 1:15-19 CEB