

"Up, Up, and ..."

Acts 1:1-11; Ps. 47; Luke 24:46-53

Rev. David E. Young

Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church

Ascension Sunday, May 24, 2009

Today is the Sunday nearest to the day on which Jesus ascended into heaven. Last Thursday was Ascension Day - 40 days after Easter. Luke records the Ascension twice - once at the end of his Gospel and then again in the book of Acts as he recounts the history of the early church from the time of the resurrection through the missionary journeys of Paul.

The Ascension of Jesus is a pivotal event in the life of the early Church. It marks the transition between the earthly appearances of Christ and his being "seated at the right hand of God the Father" as the Apostles' Creed states.

Imagine you are one of the early followers of Jesus. You have been on an incredible journey traveling from the joyous heights of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, to the Last Supper, to the awful events of that Friday sinking to the depths of despair and hopelessness with Jesus' crucifixion and death.

Even though it took a while to come alive to the reality that Jesus was alive, you have now enjoyed 40 days of intense communion with the Risen Christ. Gone is the pain of loss after his crucifixion. It has been wiped out by the indescribable glory of his resurrection and your joy at his continuing bodily presence with you. He has opened your heart and your mind to understand the scriptures. He is your Lord and your God. How could it get any better than this?

But now you are heading out of Jerusalem and up the side of the Mount of Olives. Clearly this trip up the mountain is not just a Sunday

afternoon picnic stroll. Something is afoot. It seems quite understandable that the disciples would ask him: "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" Is this the time when you will put all things right? Hasn't everything been leading up to this climax in human history when God would "make it all better" by taking charge and judging the living and the dead?

In response to their question Jesus cautions that it is not for them to know God's plan or the timetable of restoration. That day on the Mount of Olives was not the day of final reckoning. Nor has it happened up until now. In the meantime we are still called to keep about the Master's business and not waste too much time trying to figure out the time schedule.

Jesus commands his followers to wait upon the Spirit and then to be witnesses to the Good News under the Spirit's guidance and leadership.

After listening to his final earthly words they watch as Jesus ascends out of sight. All of them had missed the moment of resurrection. There were no witnesses to that event, but here on the Mount of Olives there are plenty of eye witnesses to the Ascension of the Lord and none of them wants to take their eyes off of him.

But it has to be a bittersweet moment. Jesus is heading to the heavenly places while the disciples are left flat-footed and very much earth-bound. In spite of Jesus' words to be patient and prepared, is it really any wonder the disciples were looking up, watching the soles of his feet as he vanished from sight? Their Master, the Son of God, the Great Teacher and the one who had conquered death, Jesus, was leaving them.

It's possible some of them might have been thinking, "Lord, take me with you!" Compared with the glories of heaven, how could spending one

more moment on earth be seen as anything but a life sentence to the ordinary, a delay of glory?

Just when they need him the most, Jesus is gone! He is not here. Not right here. He is "Up, Up, ... and Away! Away from them, out of sight and out of reach once again.

Little wonder they stood there looking up, trying to catch just one more glimpse. But the moment is broken by angels who gently chastise them for staring off into space. The angels ask why they are looking up in the sky and promise that Jesus would return the same way he left.

Jesus was present, then absent in the tomb, then present in the resurrection and now absent in the Ascension. The disciples have been on quite a rollercoaster ride.

They've lost someone very dear to them. We know what that's like. We too have lost loved ones. We remember them fondly and it takes us back to an earlier time, perhaps a happier time, a time when we thought we knew what life had in store for us. Things were settled and on firmer footing.

Now things are different and we have to make sense out of what is left. We know what that's like.

The disciples had to make sense of things too. They were told by Jesus that they were to become his witnesses. They would tell the story of what they had experienced. It would not be easy at times. They would get into trouble, for sure.

But Jesus had promised to be with them in the power of the Holy Spirit, even though on the day of the Ascension they still weren't sure what that meant.

But they would learn. They would learn as they learned patience and gained the ability to discern the Spirit's leading. They would learn who they were called to be as disciples and exactly what that meant.

Not all of them would be plastered on the pages of Scripture like Peter and Paul, John and Mary. Most of them would lead simple lives and remain obscure except for the combined impact that their witness would have in the world. They would live into what they were created to be.

You and I are likewise called to live into our identity as disciples of Jesus. We are not called to be anything other than what we are. We are called to witness to the love and mercy and justice of God.

Craig Barnes, pastor of Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, talks about the role of the witness. Here is what he says:

"Witnesses don't really do very much. We have somehow twisted the term to make it more creative than Jesus intended it to be when he gave the Great Commission ('go into all the world and make disciples, baptizing them...'). Often when pastors call their congregations to witness, what they really mean is that it is the laity's responsibility to convert their neighbors and friends. But that is asking too much. Only Christ converts. When the risen and about-to-be-ascended Christ tells his disciples 'You will be my witnesses,' he implies that he will continue to be the creative force for salvation in the world and that his disciples are now sent out as apostles who witness this work that remains his alone. The witness merely sees and speaks about what he or she sees. Ask any courtroom judge, and you will be told that the

last thing we need is for the witness to be creative." (The Pastor as Minor Poet, p. 63)

We are simply called to tell what we have seen and experienced. We don't have to get all flashy and creative. It is "Dragnet" all over again: "The facts, ma'am, just the facts."

The facts of the story of Jesus have more than enough to carry us along. We don't need to embellish them or deviate from them or try to make the story say any more or any less than it already says. But we do need to witness to it. Jesus needs us as witnesses. This is who we are. We need to live into this calling.

This past week I was in Atlanta to attend an annual conference on preaching. I know, I know: we'll see if it helps... One of the speakers being honored was Archbishop Desmond Tutu from South Africa. He is retired now but his spirit is very much active and youthful. He spoke with great exuberance about the work that each of us is given to do in Jesus' name.

One of the things that he challenged us with was to "become who we are". We are already the beloved children of God and part of the community of the Church. We need to live into that reality and not allow the world's realities to keep us from claiming our birthright as sons and daughters of the Living God.

It seemed to me, as he was talking, that this is exactly what Jesus did in his Ascension. He returned to the right hand of God the Father and took on the full mantle of who he is as the one who has Risen to rule the Cosmos.

In his Ascension Jesus is living into exactly who he is and because of who he is - our risen and ascended Lord - we have the power to claim who we are as people who live by faith, hope and love.

In his Ascension, Jesus has lived into who he is. He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords and all things are under his rule and authority. He has laid claim to the ultimate "high ground." There is nothing above Christ, nothing that can rival his power or his love. Because he is over us, he is everywhere with us.

We become his body in the world, called to reach out with his hands, to move into places of need with his feet, to speak with his voice of assurance and calm, to stand without fear and give a good account of the reason why we have hope and believe in the power of selfless love.

We renew our commitment to bearing witness to our risen and exalted Lord - today - and we go out as Christ's missionaries spreading the Good News and living the truth of sins forgiven and grace sufficient for all. We announce that fear has no more power over us, because love has conquered death and has opened the way for joyful living under the Risen Christ.

Thanks be to God!