

Series: VICTORIOUS SECRETS (Stories between Resurrection and Ascension)

Sermon: The Ascension

Acts 1:1-11

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach 2 until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. 3 After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. 4 On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. 5 For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”

6 Then they gathered around him and asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

7 He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

9 After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

10 They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. 11 “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”

Sermon

Happy Ascension Sunday everybody! I'm sure you looked at your calendar this morning, had it all circled and underlined. It's finally here. We've been waiting for weeks for this day to arrive. We need to get out the Ascension Sunday decorations, maybe a few party hats out. Now there maybe a few people in here who would ask, What's Ascension Sunday? (Ask). Truthfully told, Ascension Sunday doesn't get a lot of press. Tucked in between Easter and Pentecost, it's a smaller story tucked in between a couple of larger stories. But it's the last story that we have of Jesus on this earth speaking with his disciples. Sure, he may visit Paul later on, give Peter a vision from Heaven, but this is the last time he walked with his Disciples. Jesus wasn't resurrected only to die again. Jesus was resurrected to be lifted into heaven and live forever with God, so that we can know that there is life beyond this life.

Maybe one reason the Ascension gets short shrift may be because it is difficult to understand. It's a little bit science fiction-y. Jesus lifted bodily into heaven, rising like a helium balloon into the sky. Like Superman, Up Up and Away! Perhaps the disciples had an easier time understanding it than we do. This was only the latest extra-ordinary event they witnessed while in Jesus' company. Strange things seemed to happen when Jesus was around. The blind saw. The lame walked. The dead came back to life. Jesus presence alone seemed to elicit all sorts of supernatural happenings. Voices from heaven. Visits from prophets. Vacated tombs. So, perhaps, watching Jesus lifted bodily into heaven wouldn't have been so unexpected. Just one more thing! The Mormon church loves this story, for they believe Jesus was lifted into the sky, jumped over the Atlantic, and came back down in the America's - to bring the story of salvation to the Native population here, the lost 10 tribes of Israel.

So, in 19 years of ministry and preaching, I've never preached on the Ascension. Yet, for us, separated by centuries and scientific facts, this story can be a little hard to swallow. We get caught up in the 'how.' How did it happen? How could it have happened? Why did it happen? Perhaps it was easier for these early disciples, heads tilted skyward, to believe. We know too much. We need proof and explanation. We like to follow the scientific method. We need to be convinced. This whole Ascension thing makes a good story, but come on! Stuff like this only happens in comic books and at the movies!

We know from Scripture that Jesus told the disciples ~ had even explained to them more than once ~ that he would have to leave them. Yet, even in his absence they would not be alone. In his absence he had given them instructions ~ commandments ~ on how to live. Abide in my love. Love one another as I have loved you. You are my friends if you do what I command you. Today ~ Ascension Day ~ is when the rubber meets the road.

What are you going to do when your leader is gone? This is the time of year of graduations and new beginnings. I remember when I went off to college. The college I went to was only 14 miles away from the home I grew up in. There was no goodbye, goodbye, please call! Matter of fact, it was kind of the opposite. They didn't have to drop me off at the dorm, or help move in. They left that up to me. And on my last load out of the house, my dad said something like, "I know we live close by, and we want to see you, but don't come back for a couple of weeks. Stay away for awhile." Sounds cruel, but it wasn't. Still teaching. I needed to fly and be free, and the danger was that I would hang out at home between classes. I wouldn't try and make new friends - because most of my high school buddies were still within the county. I would try and relive the past, even within this great new adventure and future that was before me.

I can see the Disciples, thinking Jesus was back for good, it can be just like it always was. Let's relive the past, same group back together again. But that's not what Jesus had in mind. Maybe the real miracle isn't the Ascension itself, but what happened after it. The disciples, first with their eyes fixed upward, begin to look side-to-side. And looking side to side, they begin to form real community. A community based on what Jesus taught. Luke, in his Gospel account, describes what happened next saying, "And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God." It seems to me that Ascension Day is not a call to look up. It is a reminder that God's promise is down and in and around us.

And, just as Jesus promised, we don't have to do it alone. What first appears to be an abandonment is really an opportunity. Jesus' absence makes room for the promised coming of the Holy Spirit. "You will be baptized by the Holy Spirit not many days from now." And, filled with the Holy Spirit, the disciples' vision expanded. Looking side to side, they saw not only those next to them, but those a little farther away. They saw those who were different from them because of race or class or religion, but were in need of God's love nonetheless.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Pentecost isn't until next Sunday, and I don't want to ruin that story! The truth is, being here this morning is an affirmation that we are willing to expand our vision ~ to not only look up, but also to look side-to-side. It is an affirmation that we are nothing without community. Maybe the most unbelievable thing about the Ascension is that the disciples didn't simply return to their old jobs and homes and routines after Jesus was lifted into heaven. Or just plop themselves down on that Mountain and just it out. He's coming back, just wait and see. If they had only been out for themselves, that is exactly what they would have done. Instead, they took a chance, looked each other in the eye, and chose to live in the present.

How did Jesus get into heaven? I have no idea. Maybe someone can explain it to me, but I doubt it. Do I believe that it happened? Absolutely. But perhaps the more important question is, did Jesus' ascension change the world? When we see Christians gathering together supplies for health kits... When we see Christians sharing talents and resources rebuild devastated parts of the world.... When we see Christians offering time and money to reach out to refugees and children through community partnerships.... When we see Christians seriously considering how their giving can make a difference.... we see people willing to not only look upwards, but

side-to-side as well. And if we were just waiting for him to come back - that means we don't have to help clean up this mess - or help anybody. He'll just fix it when he gets back.

Up, Up, and Away! Maybe that's not the best catching phrase for us as Christians. Sure, Jesus ascended into heaven. Sure, the disciples were amazed at what happened and looked forward to joining him. But it all took place so that we could practice what Jesus had taught us here on earth. As the angels asked, "...why do you stand here looking into the sky?" The mission-field Jesus calls us to is down here, in front of us, to our right and left. As United Methodists we claim the mission of making disciples for Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Here at OCUMC we understand that as a call of serving, encouraging and supporting others in living Christ-centered lives. It's amazing that Jesus trusted us enough to leave this mission, this important work, in our hands.

This Memorial Day, we remember those whom we love who have passed beyond the vale. We'll gather at the cemeteries, and recall their love and sacrifices. I told you last week that I like cemeteries, our family inherited one a couple generations back, but that's another story. And the danger for me is that I can get too wrapped up in the past. I will spend too much of the present, remembering old stories, former friends or family. It is wonderful that we devote a day and weekend to honor those who have passed. But some of us do this a lot. Like too much. Where Memorial Day is everyday. Moderation is a wonderful Methodist trait. But we can go overboard, where the past can take over our present, and limit our future. Where the pain of someone's passing still hurts us today as it did a year ago, a decade ago, a generation ago. Where we pine away at days long gone, and we can't enjoy the present. The Disciples could have pined around for decades, remember when? Those were the good ol' days. Or, conversely, we're like the disciples whose eyes are still upward, waiting for that future. Jesus, come on back! And everything we do is just sitting around waiting for . . .something. Waiting for our ship to come in. Or worrying about the future - I think Jesus said some words about that. I love the angel's rebuke, because I need those words sometimes. Why are you staring up here? He'll come back, don't worry. Just get on with your life already!

I want to close today with a poem. It's in your bulletin this morning. I found this in my freshman year of college.

I was regretting the past and fearing the future. Suddenly, my Lord was speaking:
"My name is I AM"

He paused.

I waited.

He continued:

"When you live in the past, with its mistakes and regrets, it is hard. I am not there. My name is not - I WAS.

When you live in the future, with its problems and fears, it is hard. I am not there. My name is not - I WILL BE.

When you live in this moment, It is not hard. I am here. My name is I AM."

Helen Mallicoat

This Memorial Day, we remember our past, our ancestors, our dead. We honor their sacrifices. And yet, those sacrifices and love that they showed allow us to live in the present, to make a difference today, to make our mark today. To be in mission and ministry today. And the family of God said, AMEN.