

CLOSURE – ON SO MANY LEVELS

TEXT: Acts 1:1-11

How important, how widely acclaimed, is Ascension Day? You would look long and hard, and high and low, to find an Ascension Day greeting card. Our card merchants, always on the lookout for another way to lure the great American buyer into the shops, have yet to discover this dramatic occasion as a source of increased sales. And how have they missed Ascension Day balloons, an obvious tie-in, or Ascension Day climbing gear? “Follow Christ into the clouds” might be an apt slogan for a Christian climbing firm. Well, maybe not.

It seems like we, especially we Protestants, hardly know what to do with Ascension Day. Yet, this “taking up” is in fact Jesus’ “exodus”. In fact, Jesus’ ascension, accomplished in the very beginning of the book called The Acts of the Apostles, is nothing less than his exodus from the earth, mirroring Elijah’s own mysterious ascension in a fiery chariot way back in 2nd Kings. In Luke’s telling, he connects the events of Jesus’ ascent to God with a similar experience in the Hebrew Bible and joins Jesus with the quintessential prophet of justice, Elijah. In doing so, Luke in his unique literary way, uses the ascension motif as a way of preaching to us a sermon about the true identity of Jesus the Messiah, recalling his many roots in the sacred past of Israel’s story.

The Ascension story is one that is overlooked, just simply not observed at all in many of our churches. This seems like poor treatment of an event that the writer of Luke-Acts thought important enough to narrate twice. Perhaps the scene of Jesus ascending on a cloud is a bit too reminiscent of Peter Pan. Perhaps we just can’t tolerate too much worship spilling into such a short period of time. So soon after the Resurrection, and running up close to Pentecost, it just gets lost in the shuffle.

So, why should we take one Sunday to celebrate the Ascension? We've had a lot of celebration these past few weeks. But let me suggest that there are three reasons to continue this celebration today.

First and quite possibly foremost, is that the ascension solidified that Jesus was establishing the kingdom. Even though Jesus lived his entire life fulfilling the kingdom's promises, it's clear that his ascension is the key. When he arrives in "heaven", he sits down at the Father's right hand and his rule officially begins. It is the recognition of Jesus as Lord.

Secondly, Jesus' ascension is the reason that he can send the Holy Spirit. The stage is now set for the giving of the Spirit. Jesus' going to the Father means that the Spirit will be poured out on God's people. Jesus' ascension matters because he promised that his departure would do just that – send the spirit to God's people. Lo and behold, he kept his promise. And Pentecost is coming.

Thirdly, this story is about the absence of Jesus. So, how do we live as followers of Jesus without his visible, physical presence? The disciples have to be called away from staring up in expectation and wonder at where they last saw Jesus. They aren't looking for the wrong thing (or, rather, the wrong person), but simply in the wrong place. All that Jesus began to do and to teach didn't end with his ascension. The church continues to proclaim, to teach, to love, and to serve in Jesus name.

Which brings me to ask about Heaven. What is Heaven? Is Heaven a "place" where Jesus resides, sitting beside the Father? Does this mean that we are all – at least those of us who profess faith in Jesus – will walk the golden streets with Jesus and the saints who have preceded us in death? The disciples looked upward for heaven. The story of the Ascension tells us that Jesus "went up", in a cloud. And, yes, the clouds are far up and we must strain our eyes to see them. But today I would ask us to rethink our vision of the Almighty seated on a throne of gold, surrounded by angels with wings and harps. Rather than a place in the stratosphere, I like to think of heaven as the place that is

wholly spiritual in nature. Yes, it is the place where God dwells, but it bears no resemblance to a city of gold. Our Christianity defines heaven as being in the presence of God. In 2nd Corinthians Paul tells us that God has prepared places for the faithful in eternal bliss beyond that which can currently be known. Those who dwell in heaven are given new bodies that do not decay and death will be gone..

I think what the Ascension story does is clarify what resurrection means. And it really doesn't mean that there is life after death; it isn't even a promise that we'll go to heaven when we die. To proclaim Jesus' resurrection is to claim that God has exalted *him* – the same Jesus who welcomed the sinners, who suffered and died in shame and rejection by the world – as Lord and Messiah. Jesus is God's promise and plan for the whole world, and neither death nor any of its minions are able to stop that.

For now, the disciples must wait to receive power from the Holy Spirit. And for such things, we must wait and trust in God's promise. As the Messiah floats above them ready to be drawn upward into a cloud on the way to heaven, he warns the disciples not to leave Jerusalem, the center of all divine activity (at least for Luke). They are to await the baptism of the Holy Spirit, which will follow, as promised. In their excitement, the disciples ask about the possibility that at last the Kingdom of Israel is about to be restored, to which Jesus tartly retorts: "The times and the seasons that the Father has reserved to his own authority are not yours to know". God has God's own time for restorations, says Jesus. We have other work to do, as he then makes clear with the promise of the Holy Spirit.

Did you catch the little side story of two men who were standing near the disciples? They saw the disciples looking up to the heavens, and said to the stiff-necked (in more ways than one) disciples that their eyes were not looking in the right place. "Why do you stand looking into heaven?" Did they not pay attention to him just a few moments ago? He said "Go", and you are rooted on this spot, looking longingly for some further word from him. He will come back in the same way he went, but you need ask no further questions about when, they imply. "When" is simply not the right question to ask.

As I said before, the ascension of Jesus is important on so many levels, and yet we seem to pass it off as just another item in the Easter story. But it matters because it gave the people closure and hope to continue forward. There is an old saying that “If you love something, let it go”. If love is meant to be, it will come back and last forever. That’s what the ascension represents – love that left and came back stronger. Everyone endures heartbreak in life, but sometimes departure is good for both parties. The same is true about Jesus’ ascension. The ascension is when Jesus sends the spirit to God’s people. Moreover, his departure is good news because the spirit is wonderful news.

Jesus’ ascension matters because he promised that his departure would do just that – send the spirit to “God’s people. The good news will always be the best news because it ultimately gives our lives purpose and creates our destiny. It represents a fresh start and the strength of our faith. We are blessed beyond measure to have the opportunity to live out the adventure of our lives and have our all-loving God by our side. Praise be to God. Amen.