

Pastor's Message – 5/16/2021  
Acts 1:1-3, 6-8; Luke 24:44-48  
Acts 1:9a, Luke 24:49-53

What should we make of this event: the ascension of Jesus that we read about in our Bible reading? What are we to make of Jesus' ascension into heaven as twenty-first-century people? Even the Bible isn't consistent regarding the event. John doesn't mention it; Matthew doesn't mention it; Mark does, though it may be a later addition to his gospel. Luke writes about it in two places: at the end of his gospel and at the beginning of his Book of Acts.

And those two places are inconsistent. In the gospel, Jesus' ascension occurs on the evening of the resurrection: after the story of the Road to Emmaus and after Jesus appears to the disciples as they are gathered together in Jerusalem and Jesus eats a piece of broiled fish. In the Book of Acts, Luke suggested it was forty days later. Verse 3 says, "During the forty days after his crucifixion, he appeared to the apostles from time to time, and he proved to them in many ways that he was actually alive."

The when, I might suggest, is not as important as the why and the wherefore. It is the meaning of the event, both for Jesus and for the disciples and ultimately for us, that is the important thing for us to consider. Traditional treatments of the Ascension have often taken on the same scolding tone as the white-robed men who came to stand next to the open-mouthed disciples as they watched the wrinkled soles of Jesus' feet disappear behind a cloud. "Men of Galilee," they say, "why are you standing here staring into heaven? Jesus has been taken from you into heaven, but someday he will return from heaven in the same way you saw him go!"

We're supposed to believe that the disciples are goofing off as they stand there staring into the sky. Even after Jesus has "opened their minds to understand the Scriptures" and tells them, "you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth," they don't get immediately to work.

It may be understandable. After all, they grew up cleaning fish and collecting taxes - not as religious leaders. They'd misunderstood parables. Fought over who was the greatest. Fell asleep in the garden. Denied Jesus in his last days. They'd only *fully* understood the life and mission of Christ

over the last 40 days, when he "opened their minds to understand the scriptures" (Luke 24:45). Humanly speaking, perhaps the disciples weren't the best choice to advance the good news.

"[Y]ou will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (v. 8). Jesus was echoing the sentiments of the prophets before him. Unfortunately, Israel had always been a bit too myopic regarding their sense of purpose and identity. They forgot that Abram's blessing was to go to *all people*. They forgot that the temple was for *all nations*. They were passionate about being God's people in God's land, but often neglected God's mission and justice. Jesus was perfectly clear in his last earthly words: advance the gospel to the ends of the earth!

Think back to the last time you had news to share. Maybe it was a graduation of a grandchild or a child. Maybe it was a birthday party. Maybe it was a new job or a move. Maybe it was an illness or a death. We tend to share news and share it quickly. There is an American proverb that says news, especially bad news, travels fast and we know that, especially in small towns, news travels fast even when we might not have everyone know.

Sometimes the news we have to share is painful or just doesn't make sense. We hear of shootings of ten-year-old children or cancer in a friend or family member. Sometimes we hear of accidents and early deaths. Life is filled with ups and downs and uncertainties. Aging, sorrows, burn-out, or a sense of meaninglessness in life all contribute to a general sense of "what's the point" or escapism or denial of the good news.

But the ascension is our life raft in this context; it is a proclamation of the fact that the universe makes sense because the loving presence of Jesus Christ is in heaven, and so those values are embodied in the structures of the cosmos. John Calvin, the founder of the Presbyterian church, makes clear that the ascension shows that God's love for us demonstrated in Christ was no ordinary work of God, but embodies what God is all about. Jesus embodies God's intentions in creation.

There is a final scene in the musical Camelot when King Arthur is preparing for the final battle with the army of his son, Mordred. He hears a rustling in the bushes and flushes out a young boy, Thomas Mallory, who tells Arthur that he wants to be a knight of the round table. Arthur, instead, sends him back and orders him to tell all he meets of the story of Camelot: one brief shining moment when justice was the law of the land.

We have an even more profound story to tell: a story that transcends time and space and even the earth itself. Followers of Jesus have the

opportunity to share the news of Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension and the forgiveness, salvation and grace that are the fruit of those events. Disciples of Jesus are called to be witnesses of "Good News."

Martha Grace Reese, author, pastor and once Director of "Unbinding the Gospel," a project on evangelism in mainline denominations, writes in one report introduction, "Evangelism books presume everyone wants to do evangelism, so they tell you *how* to do it. Six years of national, Lilly Endowment-funded research in nine denominations have demonstrated conclusively, that most people would rather get a root canal than think about evangelism. You can tell people to 'go be missional' until the cows come home. They just won't do it until they *want* to."

Reese explains, "If we answer the 'WHY share my faith?' question, we'll start wanting to know 'HOW can God use me to help people move into faith?' Our churches can't share their faith until they're loving, relational communities where people (1) pray and (2) talk comfortably with each other about their own faith experiences. Once our churches make this shift, we'll want to know *HOW* to share our faith."

When we have good news to share, many of us can't wait to call someone or text or tweet. We just can't keep overwhelming good news to ourselves. In her book *Unbinding the Gospel*, Martha Grace Reese asks the question: What fills your pitcher and causes it to overflow? "If you believe that hell or heaven is a consequence of a decision to become or not become a Christian, that may fill your pitcher almost to the top! If you don't believe that, you have to have your pitcher filled with many other reasons to get it to the top .... What is filling your pitcher? Is it overflowing?"

She makes the point that our desire to share the good news comes from our genuine belief that we are filled with good news.

In her book, Reese stresses that when people look to the church, they are seeking to join with people whose lives are centered in a relationship with God. They're not looking for a social club! So, prayer needs to be an important part of the life of any person who wants to spread the message of Jesus.

Then, when you begin to develop relationships with people outside the church, realize that they're looking to have their lives changed, and even transformed. They want to feel welcomed and accepted. They want to learn about God and how to experience spiritual growth. They want the forgiveness and new life that comes through a relationship with Jesus. The good news is that we can help people to experience this kind of

transformation, because we have been shaped by the family values of Jesus and the disciples.

Prayer? We can do that. Providing a warm welcome? Shouldn't be a problem. Forgiveness and new life? We can talk about what Jesus has done for us, and in so doing help others with the spiritual growth they desire. This can happen around tables in our homes or tables at church.

The story of Easter morning will always be at the heart of the Christian faith, because it proclaims that God has conquered death through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But equally important is the tale of Easter evening, which tells us how a mighty spiritual movement began with a talk around a table and a meal of broiled fish or maybe simple bread and grape juice.

I hope that you have many meaningful passages of Scripture that have touched your heart in a special way, maybe some that you have heard today or in past Sundays. Or in your daily devotions and Bible readings that have overwhelmed your heart and mind and soul with the good news of Jesus Christ. When they do, I would invite you to share that good news, "in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." I suspect that most of you will not be going to Jerusalem, throughout Judea, to Samaria or the ends of the earth, but how about at home, with your neighbor or with people at work.

It reminds me of a song sung by Gladys Knight and country singer Lee Ann Womack called "I Hope You Dance." The first verse reads,

I hope you never lose your sense of wonder, . . .  
I hope you still feel small when you stand beside the ocean,  
Whenever one door closes, I hope one more opens,  
And when you get the choice to sit it out or dance,  
I hope you dance.... I hope you dance.

Here is one practical step to take. Share and discuss those passages over lunch today or supper. Talk about them during the week. Or call or e-mail, text or tweet your children or grandchildren and share your passages and stories. Those easy steps may be a way to start telling the story, giving praise to God for the blessings and grace that you may have once experienced and can experience again. Remember the sense of wonder when the grace of God has touched your life "and when you get the choice to sit it out or dance, I hope you dance" and sing and tell the story of the amazing love of God.