

Sermon for May 24th, 2020

(Ascension of the Lord)

Sermon texts: Acts 1: 1-11 and Luke 24:44-53

Sermon title: *Heaven's Geography*

PRAYER OF INVOCATION: We sing praises to you, O God; we raise a psalm in your honor. As you have sent Jesus Christ to make your will known, you promise your Holy Spirit to guide us now. May that Spirit descend on us this morning. Gather us into the church, as we know it today, we pray, that we may be devoted to prayer and strengthened in unity and love.

PRAYER OF ILLUMINATION: Holy Spirit, come. Come as Holy Fire, and burn in us; come as Holy Wind, and cleanse us; come as Holy Light and illumine us; come as Holy Life and dwell in us. Amen.

In the lectionary calendar, the **Ascension of the Lord** always comes on a Thursday, and the texts hardly ever get the attention they deserve. The Ascension of Jesus both astonishes and confuses, so this morning I'd like to spend some time today with the Acts and Luke texts, which describe Jesus being carried up into heaven. There's a tradition in painting that depicts the disciples gathered on a hilltop, straining their faces upward to a cloud that shows Jesus' feet hanging just beneath it. There's something a little silly, to my mind, trying to paint such a mystery. With the Hubble telescope, we have seen beyond the blue dome that Jesus' contemporaries would have identified as heaven. More than they, we are left with the question: *where did Jesus go?*

There's uncertainty with Christ's Ascension. It was there for the disciples and it's as true for us today. Jesus came from God and he returned to God. We have left the fullness of Easter with its trumpets, cantatas, lilies, and transformed crosses. Now, we live in the time between resurrection and the end of history. We will never see the historical Jesus that the disciples lived with, ate with, and accompanied; nor will we witness the miracles he performed or hear his voice as he taught and interpreted ancient Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus has gone into the future, a future that we do share. Not yet, anyhow. The house feels a little empty, the way it does when the visitors have packed their bags and we see their taillights disappearing down the driveway. We're left to tidy the house, wash the sheets and towels, and remake all the beds. It's the day for the walk back to Jerusalem.

Our challenge, as it was for those first disciples, is to figure out how to live in the in-between times. Jesus instructs the disciples to remain in

Jerusalem, and he promises him the gift of the Spirit. Either this promise wasn't good enough, they didn't understand it, or they failed to get the big picture, because they respond to this news with a question: *Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?* Maybe it looked to the disciples as if this was a good time for God to walk onto the world stage and make things whole and right again. Don't we feel today as if it might be a good thing for God to come in God's glory and make things right? What comes after the corona virus, the collapsing economy, and so many sick and dying people?

Not so fast, says Jesus. I have work for you to do. ...*you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.* Jesus is closing his ministry on earth. Before the disciples can ask a follow-up question Jesus ascends into the clouds and disappears once more. Then another miracle – two men in white robes appear and ask: *Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.*

Do you hear the promise there? Jesus wasn't simply on loan to us. He pitched his tent among us, took on our humanity, and for a time he has returned to God; the covenant is that he will return to us to restore the world. In the meantime, we are left on earth to witness.

How do we witness in these challenging times? It's a question we discussed in my lectionary group this week. One pastor said that one of the parishioners in her church said she wasn't able to love in the same way because she couldn't hug the people at church. There are many ways to express our love for one another even when we are not in the sanctuary. Some have made face masks for people in the church. Others have sent written notes to people, rather than a computer email, to express their love and support.

The power of the written word in a card is illustrated by this story from the lectionary group. A 23-year-old daughter of one of the pastors made the decision not to come home for Mother's Day because she was taking social distancing very seriously. Her mother was very sad, but needed to respect her daughter's decision. They spoke briefly on the phone. Then two days later a card arrived in the mail. The mother said the words of love

“screamed off the page,” and was so much more meaningful than a hug would have been. Are we committed to hugging or to loving? Witnessing takes many forms. That’s what we are committed to, not the manner in which witnessing is delivered.

Before the sheltering in place order was mandated, a friend of mine officiated at a Jewish-Christian wedding. At the end of the ceremony the rabbi gave seven Jewish blessings for the bride and the groom. We bless a marriage, we bless food, and, according to Luke’s account of the ascension, Jesus blesses the disciples and continues to bless them as he ascends into heaven. When they return to Jerusalem, the disciples are continually in the temple blessing God.

What does it mean to bless someone or something? I think that to bless someone or something invokes the mystery of God’s presence with us. When the bride and groom are blessed, the rabbi suggests that God wishes them well and will be with them in the marriage; when we bless the meatloaf, we are blessing God and the good things God has provided for us; when we bless anything, we recognize that there is mysterious potential, the holy, in the ordinary. We are all capable of blessing.

To acknowledge that Jesus is the incarnation of God not only changes Jesus from a rabbi and a prophet, but also changes our view of ourselves and of our work in the world. Now we see that we, too, have a role to play in God’s redemptive plan for creation. When Jesus raises his wounded hands to bless the disciples, he is blessing them with mercy, the mercy they are being commissioned to proclaim. So, talk. Or write. Write about what God has done in this church. Write about what God has done in your life. Talk about the times when you were ill and should not have recovered but did. Write about being forgiven or forgiving someone else. Tell the story of how you decided to become a Christian. Write about the beauty of the earth. Shout blessings upon the meatloaf, your friends, this church, the bride and the groom, your children and your parents, and on all God’s good creation. You and I are part of the plan, and we carry Easter life within us. As it turns out, heaven’s geography is right here, right now. Amen.