

“Don’t Just Stand There!”

May 17, 2015

Ascension Sunday

Acts is thought to be second volume to the Gospel of Luke – written by the same writer. So we start at the beginning with a review of the Gospel. We learn about what Jesus was doing the 40 days after Easter – explaining to his disciples what Good Friday and Easter meant and promising them the coming of the Holy Spirit. We also hear that the disciples still had questions about how Jesus would restore Israel. And then we come to the account of Jesus’ ascension – his going to be with God.

This is like a high-budget movie scene. And, honestly, it’s one of those places in Scripture where I can’t wrap my mind around what’s happening. Jesus has been with the disciples after the resurrection and has appeared to them and eaten with them. So this moment when Jesus is ascends to heaven is a bridge between Easter and Pentecost. There’s a disconnect if we don’t realize that Jesus’ ascension is important. This is a moment when we realize that he is Lord! And that his Lordship means something for our lives.

I love the question from the two men who appear after Jesus is taken up. *“Men of Galilee, 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.”* I’d have an answer: *where am I supposed to be looking?*

The disciples had been there with Jesus, and all of a sudden, he’s gone! He promised the Holy Spirit, but now what are they supposed to do? Their leader is gone. The past 40 days had been difficult and wonderful all at the same time. Jesus had been crucified, and they had feared for their lives because they were his followers. Jesus had been raised and returned to them. Then Jesus told them that they would be the ones to share his message with a hostile world. Now he disappears into the sky? Where are they supposed to be looking? What are they supposed to do?

Perhaps they had fear and anxiety because the kingdom of power they counted on wasn’t what Jesus came for. Jesus’ plan of a Kingdom of love was different than they expected. Perhaps they were sad not to see Jesus again face-to-face. Perhaps they were just awestruck! I can imagine myself gazing up – mouth open, eyes wide, speechless.

Stopping and taking in what’s going on isn’t a bad thing. But it’s interesting that these two men appear and question the disciples: *“why do you stand here looking into the sky?”* Maybe they’re trying to say, *“Yes, he’s really gone. You don’t have all of the*

answers about when he'll come back, but he will come back." I also wonder if their question could be taken as *"Don't just stand there! There's work to do!"*

The question is a challenge to them and to us. Consider the event: Jesus has just promised power from the Holy Spirit. Jesus has just told them that they will be his witnesses starting from Jerusalem and going out into the world. It's quite a mission – considering that Jerusalem still isn't a safe place for them to be. Followers of Jesus aren't popular.

As we focus on intentional faith development – growing in faith – being challenged to live our faith every day, are we fearful? Anxious? Awestruck? Can we live with that sense of waiting and anticipating what will happen when the Holy Spirit comes?

The purpose of these men in white and their question is to encourage the disciples and us to believe and keep on going – to carry out the mission that Jesus has given. Now I'm not a runner by any stretch of the imagination, but this year, I participated in Girls on the Run with Ana – a program that helps girls build self-confidence, and it all ends with a 5K race. Now I've walked 5Ks many times, but I've never run. I can tell you, though, the race is a lot easier when you're running with other people and when people line the route and cheer you on.

If you've ever been watched a relay race, you know how important the baton pass is. The baton pass can make or break a race for a relay team. Jesus' ascension is a baton pass. He gives his disciples in every age the responsibility to carry on his work and promises to be with them through the Holy Spirit.

But staring up into the sky isn't going to get the job done. Knowing what we know about Jesus isn't enough. Just like these first disciples, we have to take our experience and share it so that others will know who Jesus is and believe in him to experience new life and hope. When we say in our creed that Jesus ascended into heaven, we're affirming that Jesus is still alive and still offers us the Holy Spirit's power to minister in his name and for his sake. Jesus still offers us grace for forgiveness. Jesus' presence still encourages us to keep going.

Yet, even in saying that, I know it's not that simple. We claim the resurrection and ascension together. That Jesus was raised from the dead to give us new life and that Jesus ascended into heaven to reign there and give us life with God is vital to our faith. But so often what we believe and how we behave don't go together. It's easy to say one thing and do another.

But wouldn't it be easier to sit around in our small group and talk about Jesus – how great he is, the great things he did, how much he loves us? Yet Jesus' words were not a joke: *"you will be my witnesses into all the world."* There's a great church sign that reads: "We are called to be witnesses; not judges or lawyers." We cannot stare into the sky. We have holy work to do – teaching, preaching, healing, loving, giving, and serving. We have to look around!

When Jesus ascended into heaven, it gave new meaning to his command to love. Last week, we were challenged by Jesus' words to make a commitment to love – to truly be his friends who love God and one another because we want to – not because we are guilty or forced.

Yes, we believe in Jesus, but sometimes we feel like there's nothing but us – we're just ordinary people. But we don't do any of this alone. When Jesus ascended, he promised that we'd have the power to do his work. He didn't answer the question about when he'd bring the Kingdom in all its glory, but instead he gave the disciples the gift of empowerment.

We can be disciples – alive and hopeful – because of Jesus' promises. When Jesus ascended, it wasn't an end to his ministry, but a beginning for his followers. The disciples don't even have a chance to respond because Jesus is lifted up just as he promises the Holy Spirit. They will receive it just as he said, but the gift is theirs only to continue his work on earth.

We are the Body of Christ – you and I and all who follow Jesus. Philip Yancey reminds us that Jesus didn't leave behind books or pamphlets or a museum; he leaves his traces in transformed people! Jesus is known because of his witnesses – people like us! Today we celebrate with Yvonne, David, and Lisa who will make a commitment to follow Jesus as a part of this congregation. What a joy! And what a challenge!

Being disciples means spending our time looking at the needs around us – not staring up into the sky. Jesus says plainly that we don't need to concern ourselves with how the Kingdom will come – when or where. We don't need to concern ourselves with Jesus' return – but we should be ready for it. And the way to be ready is to live as a disciple – loving God and one another with the love Jesus taught us to share.

Discipleship means focusing on needs – physical needs like hunger and pain, spiritual needs like loneliness and comfort. Discipleship means being a witness and sharing our faith in whatever way we can – by words and actions – not being afraid to tell others that we do what we do and we are who we are because of Jesus Christ. Discipleship means offering Jesus Christ to others because of what he has done for us.

Even this week, I saw people sharing the love of Christ by preparing and serving a funeral luncheon and serving at Supper House. Our Wednesday night women's Bible study hosted a baby shower for a woman who has a powerful story of God's love and grace in her life. She and her family were touched by the generosity of strangers. Yesterday we hosted a time of holy conversations with people from around our district. Today we will have guests here as we host Family Promise. Soon we'll offer Grief Share, a ministry that offers support, healing, and hope to those who have lost a loved one through death.

Those are just some of the needs we know of and respond to. I'm sure there are more. What do you see? Write them down and tell me or someone else. No need is too great or small – no idea is too far out! It's amazing how the church grows when needs are met! Our hearts are transformed through prayer and service. It's amazing how needs can be met when people come together!

Someone has said, "At the ascension, Jesus took all of human life, which he cared for so deeply, and brought it "into the heavenly places," into the very heart of God. This includes the suffering refugee, the abused child or spouse, the one in prison, the victim of war or terror, the lonely one in the nursing home, the one who struggles with depression or a lost sense of worth and value, the one who feels excluded, those who are sick, all who are in difficult transitions in life."

Friends, don't just stand there! Jesus calls us to witnesses for him.

Thanks be to God. AMEN!