

“He Goes Before You into Galilee”

Acts 1: 1-11

May 24, 2020

A Sermon Preached by Reverend Debbie S. Osterhoudt

Today is the Sunday in the church year when we consider the meaning of the Ascension, the event which is recorded in the first chapter of the Book of Acts.

Luke/Acts is a two-part story, written by the same author. The Gospel of Luke is Part One and it is the story of Jesus Christ and his ministry. Part One concludes with the story of the resurrection – God overcoming the forces of evil and death. The disciples play a key role in Part One. But honestly, sometimes they get it - sometimes they are loyal and dedicated to Jesus and his ministry - but more often than not they are confused, wanting to control Jesus and his ministry. They tend to be fickle, fearful, doubtful, thick skulled, lack vision, and they seek their own positions of power and authority.

Part Two is the story of how God will use this band of ordinary, flawed, timid followers to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ around the world and it is recounted in the book of Acts; Acts is the story of the church. The story of the church in Acts does not begin with Pentecost – the day we usually claim as the birthday of the church and which we will be celebrating next Sunday. It all begins with the Ascension of Jesus Christ into heaven – an event which theologian Karl Barth claims is the most pivotal but the least considered for the life of the church.

Prayer for Understanding:

Read Acts 1: 1-11

Several years ago, my sister gave me the first four books in a series of, what is now, 16 best selling books, entitled “*Left Behind*”. The authors, Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, have written a fictionalized account of the ends times, using passages, loosely I might add, from the Bible as a resource; they base their books on a genre of biblical literature which scholars call “apocalyptic literature” – books like Daniel, Ezekiel, Revelation and specific passages from the gospels themselves. *Left Behind* tells the story of the end times, in which true believers of Christ have been “raptured” (taken instantly to heaven) leaving the world shattered and chaotic. I opened the first book in the series not knowing, at that time, what the books were about. After the first chapter, I realized what a distortion of scripture it was and how it played into people’s fear, so I decided to take my Christmas gift to the used book store. I asked my sister if she knew what the content of the books were all about. She responded that she had not read them, but everyone in the school where she teaches was raving about them. Truth is – people become fascinated with, what we have named, the Apocalypse. What it will look like, when will it occur, am I and my family ready. End time theories seem to be popping up again as we navigate through this pandemic.

Jesus has something to say in response to our fascination with the end times.

Acts 1 begins with the disciples gathered with the risen Christ on a hill outside of Jerusalem called Olivet. Jesus speaks to them for the last time, and then quite suddenly, too suddenly in their minds, he disappears inside a cloud for good. One moment he is there with

them and the next moment he is gone, his well-known hand raised in final blessing, his familiar shape vanishing into the fog like the end of a dream. Jesus' presence with them is now only a memory. It was not enough that through him God was born into the world; that was just God's Christmas gift to us. God's ascension gift was that through him the body of the world was borne back to God. Jesus not only brought God to us; Jesus also carried our humanity back into the presence of God.

That is what we celebrate today - the Ascension of Jesus Christ. His departure into heaven. A funny thing for the church to celebrate. Where did Jesus go? When will he be back? And we obsess trying to figure out when exactly he will return. Jesus promises he will return but he tells us not to worry about when that will happen. So, what are we to do in the meantime, during his absence?

Those first disciples surely felt, I imagine acutely, Jesus' absence as he departed into heaven. They also surely knew that it was now up to them. The mantle of his ministry has now been laid upon their shoulders. And what they encounter in Christ's absence is two angels; looking a lot like the two angels who greeted them outside the empty tomb on that first Easter morning. And their message: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" Actually, that is a pretty absurd question. Jesus just ascended into heaven, and they are probably still scratching their heads. Why would they want to look to earth, where things have turned bad, chaos and suffering, and we are forever tempted to do wrong? Why should we not try to get beyond this fleshy, messy life, to be with Jesus in Spirit if not in the physical here and now? The angels continue: "If you want to see Christ again, it is no use looking up. Better you should look around instead, at each other, at the world, at the ordinary people in their ordinary lives, because

that is where you are going to find him now, not the way you used to know him, but a new way of knowing, not in his risen body, but in your bodies - even if they are flawed and limited.”

In this opening chapter of Acts, something has now changed. In Christ’s absence the eleven disciples become the church. Followers become leaders, listeners become preachers, converts become missionaries, the healed ones become healers. The disciples become apostles, witnesses to the risen Lord by the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus was taken away and eventually they stopped looking up toward heaven and looked at each other instead, and got on with the business of being the church. And they began to sound like him and do amazing things like him. They became brave and capable and wise. That is the mission of the church – our church. In Jesus’ absence we are called to be his hands, his feet, his arms, his heart in this community and our world, doing the things he did.

Teresa of Avila, a 16<sup>th</sup> century saint, wrote this prayer:

“God of love, help us to remember that Christ has no body now on earth but ours,

No hands but ours, no feet but ours.

Ours are the eyes to see the needs of the world.

Ours are the hands with which to bless everyone now.

Ours are the feet with which he is going about doing good.”

Sometimes it takes the absence of something in order to make room/space for the new. I can remember when my daughter Stephanie was in High School. I tried so hard to teach her the discipline of washing her own clothes and keeping her room clean. Finally, in frustration, not long before she went off to college, I simply quit washing her clothes. For a while she would fight with me about it; I adamantly refused to engage with her about doing her own laundry.

When her closet was emptied, she decided she better start doing her own laundry. I watched her for a couple of weeks, wash the colors with the whites and have everything coming out pink and I noticed that she never folded her clothes and put them away. But you know what, if I wanted her to do her own laundry, then I needed to relinquish my need to try and tell her exactly how I would do it. She had to figure out how she was going to do it.

Maybe Jesus needed to leave the disciples behind to enable them to pick up the ministry to which he had spent 3 years training them; give them an empty space to begin to minister using their skills, their experience, their resources. And I can almost guarantee that Jesus would be disappointed if they spent these gifts obsessing about when the end times might occur.

During the First Continental Congress, when our founding fathers were debating and parsing the word of the Declaration of Independence, tradition has it that a total eclipse of the sun occurred at high noon. The delegates were so frightened by such a strange astronomical event, some of our leaders believed that the end times were near. Chaos and fear dominated the atmosphere in the room; many wanted to immediately leave for their homes. Benjamin Franklin stood and calmly stated: “Gentlemen of the House, the world is either coming to an end or it is not coming to an end. If it is not coming to an end, there is no need to adjourn and go home. But if it is coming to an end, I want the Lord to find me doing my duty for my fellow countrymen. I therefore will entertain a motion that each of us light candles so that we may enlighten this hall of democracy and die responding to the call from God before us.”

The disciples had a choice to make on that hill. And it is the same choice put before us this morning, by the way. As they watched Jesus being lifted into the clouds, they could either remain on the hill obsessing about how Jesus’ departure would impact their individual worlds,

arguing about something they would never know – when Jesus was returning. Or they could descend the hill and go into the city and do as Jesus' did: caring for the poor, being present for those who suffered, offering hope to those who despair – defining our life by what we share and how we make the world a better place. And cherishing each moment we have on this earth to give of ourselves to others. I'm glad they made the decision to get about the business of the church, instead of standing and waiting for their own personal salvations.