

May 28, 2017

Year A; Ascension Day observed, 7th Sunday of Easter

Acts 1:1-11

Psalm 93

Ephesians 1: 15-23

Luke 24: 44-53

“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

Last week I mentioned that Ascension Day is one of my favorite days in the whole church year and that, though it occurred this past Thursday, exactly 40 days after Easter Day, we will observe it today. The story of the ascension of Jesus is only told in detail in Luke, and in Acts, which was written by the same author as Luke, Acts serving almost as a Luke: Part 2.

We will begin with the story, as I said one of my favorites! And then we will look a bit at how it speaks to us today.

Ever since the women returned to the tomb on that Sunday morning, coming with grief-filled hearts to do the only thing left, to prepare their friend Jesus’s body for burial and found the tomb empty and angels there to tell them the first word of the resurrection, ever since, for 40 days, Jesus has been appearing and disappearing to the men and women closest to him during his earthly ministry....

Walking with the travelers on the road to Emmaus....coming through the locked and fearful doors of the upper room....finding Thomas to be sure he is back with the others and has what he needs to believe....and waiting on the shore of Lake Galilee, making breakfast for them all when they return from a night of fishing.....

Each appearance is sudden and startling and thrilling, and each time Jesus appears their hearts are lifted, and those men and women must have wondered, is this how it will be now? Will he keep appearing to us, will he stay? What are we to do? They had spent 3 years, leaving there every day, ordinary

lives to travel with Jesus and now they have wondered for 40 days...what is next?

Well, finally Jesus appears once more and leads them outside of Jerusalem, towards Bethany, the town where Lazarus and Mary and Martha lived.....I can only imagine how his friends must have wondered...where are we going now?

Jesus speaks to them of waiting for the Spirit, the advocate.....but they can hardly imagine what this means and so they just keep following him out of the city and into the quieter countryside toward Bethany and then finally up in the hills to the Mount of Olives.

Here Jesus raises his hands, his hands that still show the wounds of the cross, and with those scarred hands he blesses them. And then....he ascends! He is raised up and quickly disappears into the clouds.

And his friends stand there, heads up turned, waiting, watching, amazed, and bewildered....Jesus had disappeared before in the past 40 days but never like this! Will he re-appear? They stay there..... staring upward.....

And then comes my favorite part of this story.....as they stand there, mouths hanging open, staring....2 angels appear...and they do not notice, as they are not looking down, or around, but only up.....

And I always imagine these 2 angels waiting for the group, for someone to notice them.....and they do not move.....So finally, I figure, the angels.....reach out one angelic finger and.....tap them on the shoulder!

And say: “Hey! Galileans, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” What are you doing?? You are looking in the wrong direction, again!

These angels are very reminiscent of the angels at the empty tomb in the account from Luke. Several of the women had gone to prepare Jesus’ body, and they are staring into the tomb, looking also in the wrong direction...only towards death, when the angels appeared too, and probably had to tap them on the shoulder, to get their attention and then asked: “Why are you looking among the dead for one who is alive?”

In both instances these angels nudge Jesus's followers when they are stuckwhen they are only able to look in one direction, unaware or unable to see that there are options, better directions and calls.....all around them.

We need these angels too....as we too can so easily get stuck.....sure of only one path.....one path that is without life, but that makes us cling to what was..... rather than seeing forward to what is possible.....

And so, after the angels depart, the group walks together back to Jerusalem. Jesus had told them to wait there.....having said: “....John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

And so, the ascension story ends or pauses here. They go back and wait.

Now what can we find, more than 2000 years later, what are we offered in this wonderful, fantastical story of the ascension?

Well, beyond the frequent need in our lives for angels.....angels with a sense of humor to tap us on the shoulder and ask pointed and pointing questions, noting that we are stuck, that we are looking in the wrong direction, again, that we can be rigid in our belief that there is only one path forward.....

Besides keeping aware of those angels, I notice 3 points in these “not many days” the disciples lived between the Ascension and Pentecost, the arrival of the Holy Spirit.

First, the followers of Jesus returned from the hillside with these spare directions....go back to the city....stay together...wait....not many days for the Spirit. They had to wait....Jesus was no longer there to quiz and ask for clarification....not many days.....how many is that??....they had to wait....they had to live in God's time not their time....not many days might be 2 or 20, but there call was to wait.

We are terrible at waiting, we are impatient people who, with modern technology can say down to the millisecond how long a time period is....and yet we are called at times, just like the disciples.....to simply.....wait.

Our world today does not value quiet and waiting, but we still are called at times to do so....this may be in our personal lives, this may be in our life together as the church, but in our frantic times we need to notice when the call is to live in God's time, and wait.

Second, we need to notice HOW the disciples waited. They did not return to the city and scatter, agreeing to check in daily to see if the Spirit had appeared to anyone. No, they stayed together, they continued to be in community together.

Last week I noted that Christianity is a communal faith, that, though our individual prayers and lives are valued, that Christianity occurs most deeply when we are together, Jesus is among us, that we are called to work and help and offer God's love and hospitality together....just like those first followers staying together, waiting.

And finally, we need to note what the disciples did WHILE they waited together for the Spirit. The followers did not sit around grimly waiting, drumming their fingers, sniping at each other, and muttering about God's time and how long IS "not many days"???

No, our Gospel reading tells us they were filled with "great joy; and they were continually in the Temple blessing God." They did not have the answers, they were waiting, they could not see far down the path that God was calling them to take....and yet, they were filled with joy, they did not wait to be joyful only when things were clarified, when all was clear.....no, they chose to NOTICE God's blessings surrounding them now.

So the next time you feel a tap on your shoulder, there may be angels nearby unawares, nudging you.....nudging us.....inviting us to look in new, lifegiving directions, encouraging us on God's unknown paths for us.....together, paths that hold the joy and honor of being vessels of God's love in this broken and hurting world.

Amen.

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