

“LOOKING IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION”

Date: June 6, 2007

Text: Acts 1: 1-11

Here is a question to start us off. In the last two months we have celebrated Easter, Pentecost and Memorial Day. Can you think of one religious holiday that was neglected? Those with a Roman Catholic or Episcopal background might have an idea but I can almost guarantee that Presbyterians, Methodists and Baptists won't have a clue. The holiday is Ascension Day and relates to our morning passage from the first chapter of Acts. This event that took place forty days after Easter may not be celebrated in many mainline denominations but there is a message for us in the words of Acts 1.

You may realize that we are not following the Biblical story in chronological order because Ascension precedes Pentecost. However, since we moved our celebration of Pentecost ahead one week this year I guess it is okay to look at Acts 1 after Acts 2. Ascension Day is seldom referred to in our tradition for two reasons: it is not as important to the New Testament story as Easter and Pentecost and, secondly, the passage is extremely difficult to interpret. Have you ever wondered what happened to Jesus after his resurrection? The New Testament offers several opinions: Mark and Matthew appear to suggest that his resurrection and ascending into heaven took place simultaneously on Easter; Luke and John tell of post-resurrection appearances. Thus, the early Church had to wrestle with some difficult questions as it tried to spread the Good News. What was Jesus' long-term role to be? Does he have any permanent power and authority or did his importance end with Easter?

Tough theological and practical questions, which continue to deserve consideration. The writer of Acts, the same author as the Gospel of Luke, tried to address these concerns about Jesus' post Easter role by combining and expanding on parts of the story of Christ's resurrection that were being shared in the early community of faith. The Ascension makes a theological statement: "Jesus now sits on the right hand of God," the place of greatest honor and power. Some time in the future he will come again to establish a new kingdom but we do not know when. Verse 7 of Acts 1 is a great response to any friends who say that the 2nd Coming is just around the corner: "it is not for you to know the times and seasons of God's activity."

Do you see how the Ascension narrative might have served a particular purpose in helping the early Church clarify Christ's on-going role? Still it is not an easy concept for us to grasp living in a different time frame. Remember that the Bible is a collection of stories and not hard data. The language used, which was readily understandable to people accustomed to dealing with mythological terms, poses great problems for some of us. For instance, the worldview of the First Century was that of a 3-tier universe: below, here and above. Quite a contrast to our view.

The number "40" was seen to represent a long time while we look upon its usage literally. The writer wanted to connect Jesus' Ascension with other Biblical events: 40 days of rain during Noah's time, 40 years in the wilderness with Moses.

Given the differences in understanding between the First and Twenty-First Centuries, you can see why it is tempting to skip over Acts 1 because it is fraught with difficulties. Remember, however, that the primary purpose of Luke was to establish the fact that Jesus reigns with God forever and ever and continues to impact the lives of his followers. Jesus is not just some here today, gone tomorrow figure in human history such as is true for so many contemporary heroes. Our second hymn reflects our morning theme, which has sustained the Church for over 2000 years: "Jesus shall reign wherever the sun does his successive journeys run. His Kingdom stretches from shore to shore, till moon shall wax and wane no more." We live in very shaky times but there is one affirmation that holds true and that is God's love given through the Living Christ.

What does the doctrine of the Ascension as interpreted in the words of that hymn mean today? Luke felt that he had provided a foundation upon which Christ's followers could build their lives. He sensed that in his time, and

just as true today, that people were uneasy about the direction of their lives. They were searching for some solid underpinning. And aren't we searching for the same thing? A Biblical question and a question of June 2007, perhaps THE CRUCIAL QUESTION: Is there any focus or purpose to my life? Consider two possible responses. A bumper sticker says, "Honk, if you know where I am going." The second: A woman walked into the hospital room of a friend who was in the terminal stage of cancer and heard her whisper: "Thank you, God. I had a nice time." Which statement captures the good news that there is One who rules with our Creator and who can guide and lead us through the confusion and bewilderment that we call daily living?

One of my favorite scripture passages comes at the conclusion of our text. Two angels appear and say, "Why do you stand looking into heaven?" I hear implied in their question that there is a time to look up and receive transcendent power and then there is a time to get back to the business of daily living. All too many Christians wait on the sidelines for some dramatic thunderbolt rather than living out their faith regardless of all their doubts and fears. We all know that there is a lot to be done to make this world a better place. Family life, economic uncertainty, the war, hunger – the list of needs are endless and we are tempted to say, "What can one person can do?" Luke reminds us that Christ has given us power to do more than we imagine.

Ascension and Pentecost set forth a daily living pattern for the followers of Jesus, who were not sure what path to follow. Acts suggests, "Don't just sit around waiting for God to do something more. I want you to be out there 7 days a week sharing all that I tried to bring about." In a world adrift, our morning lesson challenges us to get moving, to take more seriously the fact that we are Easter people.

"You shall live out your faith in the church, in the Batavia area, where you work and play." That's the message as we follow up the Pentecost experience in very personal ways. There's a story about a young boy who had been abused and neglected throughout his life. He was in the hospital with a serious illness. There was no family to visit but a man from a local church dropped by every day, sometimes with some fruit, other times with something to read. After several visits, the boy who had hardly spoken said to the man, "Sir, are you Jesus?"

That's an example of exactly what Luke was trying to convey: Christ's people are to be out in the world seeking to make a difference. Acts is all about the power and support that God gives his people to live faithfully. Chapter after chapter the story is told of people who were on fire with the news of God's love and the message is that followers in every generation are to do the same. Ascension followed by Pentecost declares: "You shall receive the power of the Holy Spirit." Scripture is clear that our Creator never sends us out to a new week simply utilizing our own human resources. The power and love of the Almighty surrounds us.

As I see it, the key to life is looking in the right direction. You can get lost in the maze of daily demands or you can make Christ the center of your life. There are a lot of people whose lives suggest the bumper sticker adage: "Honk, if you know where I am going" and all too few people who say "Thanks God. I am having a good time." It all depends on how you view life each day