

Christ is With Us, Let's Get Busy!

May 8, 2016 – The Seventh Sunday of Easter / The Ascension of Our Lord (Year C)

First Lutheran Church, St. Peter, MN

Text: Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53

Grace and peace to you from God our Creator and our risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Today's reading from Acts features the disciples asking Jesus a familiar question: "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" It's as if they're asking, 'Lord, when are you going to fix all the problems we see in this world? Lord, when are you going to end oppression and disease and hunger? Lord, when are you coming back?' This is a question that has persisted throughout Christian history and one we still hear today. And it's a question that some have used as an opportunity to capitalize upon our desire for Jesus to return. It seems like every few months we hear some new theory of the signs predicting Christ's second coming or some new calculation based on a "secret biblical code" that will finally tell us when Jesus will come back. Authors make millions writing books that warn about the so-called "rapture" and movies almost gleefully imagine apocalyptic scenarios that will end the world as we know it. I've even seen bumper stickers that say, "Jesus is Coming! Look busy!" as if Christ were some strict parent coming to check to see why we haven't finished our chores. We want Jesus to come back and just fix all the messes we see here on Earth.

But in my estimation, this yearning for Christ's Second Coming often boils down to a form of escapism – the belief that Jesus has abandoned us on this broken world and we are just waiting for the time when he comes to take us out of it. It's a belief that God's good creation has been so utterly corrupted that we can only wait for the new world to come. On first glance, it would seem that Jesus' ascension verifies this belief – that he has left this world and we should just await his return. But I don't think that's what Jesus is doing at all. Jesus flat out tells the

disciples not to worry about when he's coming back because it really doesn't matter for their work. And rather than leaving them alone, Jesus empowers his disciples saying, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses...to the ends of the earth." Rather than await the second coming, Jesus calls the disciples to await the Holy Spirit, which will come next week at Pentecost. The Spirit, which the author of Ephesians calls the "spirit of wisdom and revelation" that allows us to have the hope to work in advancing God's reign on earth. Jesus rejects the idea that this world is somewhere that we should anticipate escaping, but rather commissions the disciples, commissions us, to continue Christ's work on earth.

Today, The Ascension of Our Lord, is the culmination of the five great festivals spanning Jesus' life on Earth: His birth at Christmas, his baptism by John, his transfiguration, his Resurrection on Easter, and now his ascension into heaven. St. Augustine went as far as to name this the crown of all Christian festivals saying that it "confirms the grace of all the festivals together... For unless the Savior had ascended into heaven, his Nativity would have come to nothing...and his Passion would have borne no fruit for us, and his most holy Resurrection would have been useless." And yet, I don't think modern Christians really know what to make of this festival. If churches celebrate this day at all, few observe it on its actual date, 40 days after Easter Sunday – which was this past Thursday. I'm not really sure why so little attention is given to the Ascension, but I would guess that to modern ears, these texts seem a little...well, *weird*. Here we are celebrating the event, which, with a literal understanding, sounds like Jesus may have been the first person to utter the words "beam me up, Scotty" as he flew up into heaven. But whether or not Jesus literally and bodily rose into heaven in front of his disciples may not matter as much as what the story tells us about Christ's presence today. Like Augustine

said, this is the grand finale of Jesus' ministry on earth. This is when Jesus returns to heaven. This is when Jesus' fully and truly human body is eternally united with God. But this is also when Christ is no longer restricted to one body in one time and place but transcends all times and all places and is with us here and now. This is when Christ empowers us to continue his mission and promises to be with us forever.

I do think it's interesting that the author of Luke is the only gospel writer to include a description of the Ascension of Jesus. And what is more interesting, he actually tells it twice. Once at the very end of the Gospel of Luke, which I read as the gospel reading this morning, and then again at the very beginning of the Book of Acts, also written by Luke, which we heard as our first lesson this morning. Luke uses this event to both end his gospel and begin the sequel. So this event that seems like an obvious conclusion to the story, Jesus leaving the disciples and returning to heaven, is also used to start a new story. It is the lynchpin between these two books: one focusing on the ministry of Jesus and one focusing on the ministry of the early Church. So while the Ascension may be the ending of Jesus' earthly ministry, it is also the beginning of the Church's mission. It transfers the focus from the work of Jesus to our calling as Christ's church on earth.

I think my favorite part of the Acts version of the Ascension is that after Jesus leaves them, the disciples just stand there gawking at the sky. Maybe they can't believe what they just saw. Maybe they're hoping he'll come right back. Either way, Jesus disappears and they just stand there. But then, suddenly two men in white, possibly angels, appear and say, "Why do you stand looking up towards heaven?" It's as if they're telling them, "Why are you still standing there? Stop looking up and start looking around you. It's time to get to work!" They're not

saying, “Jesus will come back soon, so look busy,” but rather “Christ will always be with you – working with and through you, so get busy doing his work!”

On the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, there are four sites that claim to be the location of Jesus’ Ascension and each of them have churches built there for pilgrims to visit and worship. It just so happens that we Lutherans own one of those sites and, like the other religious bodies, also built a church to commemorate this momentous occasion. But rather than building a church alone, the Lutherans also built Augusta Victoria Hospital. On what could be considered one of the most holy sites in Christianity, they built a hospital. And this hospital, which is run by the Lutheran World Federation, primarily serves its Palestinian neighbors, many of whom are living in poverty, and must to cross checkpoints to even access the hospital. Now, I’m not saying this to toot the horn of us Lutherans, but I think that this is an instance where we got it right. The angels told the disciples not to keep gazing in the air, but to get to work in the world around us. Get to work continuing Jesus’ ministry – and that’s just what this hospital is doing. In the words of theologian Barbara Rossing, “If Jesus’ ascension is to have meaning, it must be by way of underscoring Jesus’ presence still on earth. And that is through us. The ascension unexpectedly turns our gaze earthward—to the medical care on this holy site at Augusta Victoria Hospital, and beyond, to every place on earth where God’s people work as agents of hope and healing in the midst of struggle.”

The Ascension allows Christ to be with us here and now – not in body, but in bread and wine, in water and the Word, in the midst of us here as the Church of Christ as he empowers us to continue his mission in the world. Jesus’ Ascension is not his abandonment of us, but our commissioning to continue his work and the promise that he will always be with us, even if we cannot see him. Because while we believe that Christ is “seated at the right hand of the Father,”

we also believe that Christ is still present in the world, in, with, and among us, working through us to bring God's reign of peace and justice on Earth. In the words of one of my favorite Easter hymns, "Christ is alive! No longer bound to distant years in Palestine, but saving, healing, here and now, and touching every place and time." (ELW 389)

So let us celebrate this festival day with the bold assurance that Christ is ascended, but is also here with us, comforting us and healing us, but also empowering us to continue his ministry on earth.

Thanks be to God!