

Sermon—“The Day Jesus Ascended”

5/16/2021

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

After forty days, the shock of seeing Jesus in their midst was beginning to wear off. Yes, the disciples would never forget the pain, sorrow, and regret that they had experienced while watching Jesus be arrested, crucified, and buried. But their Lord and Savior had been raised from the dead, he had returned to them, and in so doing he had returned to them a sense of normalcy. Like before, they spent their days listening to Jesus teach and enjoying one another’s company. For forty straight days, they stayed in Jerusalem as Jesus had commanded, embracing this new normal as they waited for the coming of the Spirit. That is when Jesus invited them to go on a walk.

As Jesus and the disciples walked toward Bethany, amidst the rolling hills of Galilee, he taught them about the kingdom of God and of how Scripture had been fulfilled through his death and resurrection. They were teachings that the disciples were still struggling to understand, even after all that had happened. So when Jesus stopped teaching, likely that afternoon, as was customary at the time, they began to ask him questions. Questions beginning with: when? When will this kingdom that you’ve been talking about come to be? Having just witnessed Jesus conquer death, they wanted to know what more could honestly be needed before the arrival of God’s kingdom. What better day could there truly be than this one, right here, right now?

The ensuing moments, as we hear in our Scripture lessons for today, were a blur. No sooner did Jesus answer their question—that they were not meant to know the date or time, but would instead be receiving the power of the Holy Spirit—did he begin to float away. Higher and higher Jesus rose in the air, until finally a cloud took him out of their sight, never to return. Just

imagine how confused and filled with amazement and horror the disciples must have been. I mean, after all the pain and grief that they had endured following Jesus' death, now he was leaving them again? Why would he ever do such a thing, especially with so much seemingly still left undone? Today, we celebrate the events of that day as a feast day, Ascension Day, one of the holiest days of the Christian year. As the disciples stood there, though, gazing up toward heaven, my guess is that celebrating was one of the last things on their minds.

So what, then, you might ask, led the disciples to return to Jerusalem with great joy, praising Jesus' name and blessing God in the temple? In part, it was the unexpected arrival of two men in white robes. Messengers sent by God who told the disciples that there was no need to continue looking up, for Jesus would one day return the same way he had departed. But it was also because those two men clothed in white pointed toward a deeper truth, a truth that the disciples were only now begin to fully understand.

Have you ever had one of those moments where everything suddenly begins to make sense, where you had an epiphany? Take the 1968 movie *The Planet of the Apes*, for example. In the movie, an astronaut crew from about 2,000 in the future crash lands on an unknown planet. The astronauts, most notably a man named Taylor, played by Charlton Heston, are taken into custody by a society of apes with human-like intelligence and speech. The apes are determined to know where Taylor and his companions are from, having only known humans who are primitive and mute. Meanwhile, Taylor is tasked with defending his intelligence as he seeks to understand where he is and why that place seems so familiar. At the end of the movie, we find Taylor riding horseback on a beach, where he discovers the remnants of the Statue of Liberty. Suddenly, in that moment, everything begins to make sense. He's been on earth that entire time, a post-apocalyptic earth.

For the disciples, the appearance of two men clothed in white presented a similar “aha!” moment. Just forty days earlier, as we heard on Easter Sunday, Mary saw two angels as she gazed into Jesus’ tomb; two messengers dressed in white who asked her why she was “looking for the living among the dead.” Then and now, the disciples realized, God had sent them two messengers clothed in white bearing messages, messages about looking for Jesus in the right place. And this message on Jesus’ ascension did not just happen on any day. It happened on day number forty, the exact number of days that it had rained on Noah’s ark and that Jesus had fasted before his temptation. Jesus’ time with the disciples before his ascension, just like these previous forty-day periods, had been a time of preparation. For Noah, it was preparation for life after the Flood, for Jesus it was preparation for the temptations he was about to endure, and for the disciples it was preparation what lay ahead now that Jesus had departed. Thanks to their time together, the disciples now realized, they were ready to receive the Holy Spirit and to go out and be witnesses in Jerusalem, in the surrounding area, and, indeed, throughout the entire world.

I wonder how many of Jesus’ followers today are still looking up to the sky, having not yet come to this realization. I mean, given all the pain and suffering that we see in the world around us, it seems only natural to ask God when. When will the healing and transformation that you have promised finally take root in this broken world? And upon not receiving an answer, or at least not the answer that we desire, we look up to heaven. We wish that we could ascend to a place wholly unlike this one, a place where all our worldly concerns can just fall away. “What’s the harm with looking up,” we think to ourselves. “After all, sooner or later, we’ll be headed to that heavenly reality anyways.”

Except the problem is that when all we do is look up, we fail to see everything that God is doing down here on earth. We fail to see the glimpses of God’s kingdom that are present in a hug

between long-separated friends, in the joy of welcoming a new brother or sister in Christ into the church, and in the blessing of giving food to the hungry and loving our enemies. We fail to see these things and, as a result, we fail to take part in them as well. Like the disciples, we have been called to be witnesses, to help transform this world, little by little, in ways that we are only beginning to understand.

Sometime later, Peter—one of the disciples gazing up into the sky that day—wrote, “The Lord isn’t slow to keep his promise, as some think of slowness, but he is patient toward you, not wanting anyone to perish but all to come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9). What Peter had come to realize in the ensuing years is that God’s kingdom was not ushered in on Ascension Day, or any after that for that matter, because God is waiting on us. God is patiently waiting on those among us who have not yet accepted God’s call. Years ago, one of my pastors from seminary, Sam Wells, received a visit from a man he barely knew. The man was the CEO of a prominent corporation. Wells had met the man a few times before and noticed that he always looked a little disheveled, despite all of his accomplishments. That day, the man sat in the corner of Wells’ study, chewing his fingernails and nervously holding a home-made cassette tape. Finally, as he handed the tape over, the man said: “I’ve come to see you because there is no one else I can tell. I want to be a Christian. In my world that’s like saying I’m crazy. Last night I got up in the early hours and made this tape and it says all that I want to say and I want to leave it with you because there’s no one else I can give it to.” Later, after the CEO had left, Wells put the tape in his tape player and began listening. Much to his surprise, he heard the proud, accomplished man begin to sing a simple song: “I have decided to follow Jesus. I have decided to follow Jesus. No turning back. No turning back.”

God patiently waited on that man, so that he might not perish but have eternal life. So too is God patiently waiting on each one of us. Patiently waiting on those among us who still need to sing that song to accept God's call and patiently waiting on those among us who have sung it to go out and be witnesses to all that God is and all that God has done. All that God is and has done in St. Helens, in the surrounding area, and, indeed, throughout the entire world. And all God's children said, Amen.