

7th Sunday Easter A 11

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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.
Amen.

Last Thursday was Ascension Day, a day we believe when the risen Lord Jesus left this world returning to the right hand of God, to place he held prior to his birth as a baby in the manger. But as Jesus ascended leaving us behind, he did so for a purpose. Nor did Christ leave us on our own or without guidance for the mission we have been given.

We; who belong to Christ; are one with Jesus and the Father just as they are one with each other. This is what the kingdom of God is about, that we all might be one with our God and He with us as we are one with each other by the power of the Spirit.

In Jesus prayer from the Gospel of John, Jesus asks the Father to protect and guide those who follow him. Jesus prays; *"I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. ⁷ Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; ⁸ for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. ⁹ I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. ¹⁰ All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. ¹¹ And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one."*

In his prayer Jesus tells the disciples again that he is soon to return to His Father and ours in Heaven. This is what Jesus does on Ascension Day. Whenever I read those verses about his ascension, an image comes to my mind from one

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of my congregation in MN. It was their tradition on Rally Sunday following the opening of Sunday School to go outside and release balloons with a note card attached to them. The kids would stand out there watching the balloons rise higher and higher. Many times it was windy and the balloons would race off traveling farther down wind than rising in the air.

Then there was that one year when it was a beautiful, warm September day, not a cloud in the sky and very little wind. The kids released the balloons and they stayed somewhat in a group as they rose higher and higher, slowly drifting off with the light breeze that day. They kept watching and pointing, watching their balloon, knowing which red one was theirs as they floated away. When suddenly one of the kids, bored with watching the balloons drift away remembered there were treats downstairs. Making the announcement, reminding the others transfixed on the mission of watching their balloon float away that there was something more important they need to attend to; there was cookies and juice waiting for them. Abandoning their balloons to the winds and the sky they quickly raced off downstairs to see what awaited them.

In the verses prior to our reading, we are reminded that following Jesus' death and resurrection he appeared to his followers, staying with them for forty day. Jesus spoke of the scriptures, of all the things the prophets spoke about him and about the kingdom of God, reminding them of the gift of the Spirit which would soon come.

Then they ask the question the disciples were curiously waiting to hear an answer to. 'Is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?' After those three years and 40 days with Jesus the disciples still show they don't get it. They are still seeking the restoration of the Kingdom of Israel, a return of their homeland, a removal of the occupiers of their nation.

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To which Jesus responds by telling them that is none of their business, it is not for them to know, that it is the sole responsibility of the Father. But in the mean time they have a job to do. Soon the Holy Spirit will come to them and then they will be sent to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. Yet they find themselves transfixed on the rising figure of Jesus as he ascends upward, mesmerized by the sight they are just standing there looking up when the two men come to jolt them out of their trance.

“What are you doing, staring up into the sky? What did he tell you to do? There is something more important for you to be focusing on, now get to it.” Remembering their instructions, they hurry back to the room where they were staying, gathering with Jesus’ brothers, his mother and other followers for prayer. They were to wait for the coming of the Spirit, but their waiting was not to be passive or without action. They were to be active in their waiting as they gathered in community and centered in prayer as they awaited the gift of the Spirit.

In some ways those 10 days, from the ascension of Jesus to the arrival of the Holy Spirit next Sunday is a time without the presence of God. So the disciples and followers of Jesus did what we all do in times of uncertainty and struggle, we gather with family and friends to be in community, to share the stories of the past, to wait till the prodding of the spirit pushes outward back into the world.

Gathered here in this room we have come together with family and friends for prayer and to be in community, yet we do not need to wait quietly for the arrival of the Spirit. Then when you are sent you go not alone but in partnership with the Spirit of Christ which has already come to you.

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So how is it that you partner with Jesus and the Spirit in life and faith? How do you witness to your faith in Jesus? Do you see the sharing of the good news as church work or part of your vocation in life?

God's mission to share the good news of Christ is for us. Like the disciples we have learned for years what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Yet often we find excuses to just stand looking up hoping to catch the last glimpse of the ascending Jesus. Often we say we cannot serve or give witness because we do not know enough, or have not been trained or gone to seminary. We get fearful that someone might ask a difficult question we cannot answer. We think we do not have time because of family or work obligations. I am sure you had an excuse you have used come to mind. But just like back then, God used the imperfect and incompetent disciples. That is his plan to use people like us, as imperfect and incompetent as we are to share the gospel. There is no other way for the Gospel to be shared.

Like the disciples we are not alone in our mission. The disciples had to wait in Jerusalem for the arrival of the spirit. The limitations they felt during their time of waiting became unlimited opportunities through the power of the Spirit. The words that Peter and the other disciples spoke in the following chapters of Acts were not spoken by their own power, but by that of the Spirit within them. So our limitations need not stand in our way either. For we are sent we go in partnership with God's Spirit and with each other. \$

For the whole earth has needs and we have been put into the footsteps of the disciples, they gave witness in Jerusalem, and Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. We are called to give that same witness beginning in our own neighborhoods, in Platteville, in Wisconsin, in the whole United States to the end of the earth. But what might that witness look like?

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Each year when summer comes and I have youth excited about the mission trip they will be attending. Especially if they have not done a mission trip before, they come with reservations not knowing what will be expected of them, they come not sure they will be able to accomplish anything or make a difference. They often come with excitement to visit a city, to have a good time, thinking it is like going on vacation.

So I watch them as we return that first evening back to the center where we are staying. They come enlightened and encouraged, they share their experience and they are able to point out where they witnessed Jesus that day. It does not matter if it was in the face of a child they befriended, an elderly woman who porch they painted or that homeless man they fed a warm meal to. They return energized by the Spirit who gave them the courage to speak to a stranger, to shake the hand of someone different from them to offer a kind word of hope to the hopeless.

Jesus ascended leaving us behind for a purpose to be his witnesses. In doing so like the disciples, we have been commissioned to carry on the ministry of Jesus in his name. So the time is now. Now is the time to stop our excuses, to stop looking upward for inspiration and begin looking around to see what needs to be accomplished in the name of Jesus. So take a moment and think about how in your ordinary daily life can you care for God's world or his people? Take a pencil if you like and write it on your bulletin. And if you are to be so bold, share it with someone, a spouse or friend or family member. Then pray about how God might be prompting you to fulfill that need.

Jesus ascended to the right hand of God leaving us here to be his witnesses, to fulfill his mission as we await his return as he has promised.

AMEN T.G.B.T.G.