

1 Sermon, May 13, 2012

Texts: Luke 24:36-53, Acts 1:1-11

Title: "Easter Renewal: Ascension of Jesus"

How many of you remember a sermon on the ascension of Jesus — not the resurrection of Jesus, but the ascension?

According to the Bible, Jesus lived, was put to death on a cross, rose again two days later (on the third day) in a new, real, resurrected body, and was present in and out for forty days, and then he ascended into heaven. A cloud came and took him away. Two angels appeared at that time, and said that Jesus would come back the same way, with a cloud in the sky.

Usually, American Christians don't pay much attention to the ascension. It's just the explanation for how Jesus is no longer here in the flesh and left no body.

If we *were* to pay attention to the ascension, we would want to explain it. We might compare it to Elijah being taken up into heaven in the Old Testament. We might ask *how* it is that Jesus rose into heaven — and where is heaven? If it were in the sky, wouldn't our telescopes have picked it up? Or is heaven a completely spiritual reality that doesn't share boundaries with our physical world?

We Americans like explanations.

But what if the ascension isn't so much about how and why and when and where?

What if the ascension is more about the way God works? God desires for our resurrection life to go on forever. So God provides us with a Christian community to sustain us in our faith. God gives us a mission, which is to be witnesses for what God can do. And God gives us a vision to inspire us, a vision of amazing things. Isn't that the way God works?

So, let's say Jesus had just been with *us* for 40 days. He's instructed us and inspired us. Now it's time for him to leave. What mission does he leave us with?

It's a real question. If we are the body of Christ, God's feet and hands and minds and mouths in this world, what is our mission?

What's the vision that sustains us?

I'd like to suggest a few ideas for our mission:

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1. Feed my sheep

Jesus, we read a couple of weeks ago, said to Peter, “feed my sheep.” That’s one mission Jesus gives us. We’ve been trying to do that in a literal way. We’ve been offering a free monthly meal, and a bread bake. We’re involved in the food pantry. We have helped out individuals in need.

We want to help make sure that people’s physical needs are cared for. It’s an issue of compassion, and it’s also an issue of justice. It’s not just feeding people, it’s finding ways to enable people to feed *themselves*. And it’s helping overcome the barriers to people feeding themselves, barriers that often have to do with jobs and wages and economics, and food stamps – things that make it suddenly a lot harder to figure out.

Oh, it’s easy to argue about those things – but much harder to enter into the world of people who don’t have enough food because they’re homeless, mentally ill, abused or just emotionally crushed after losing job after job, with each new job paying less than the previous one.

2. Love one another

Our mission is also contained in Jesus’ commandment to love one another.

We demonstrate that love by cleaning up the paths in the community garden this Saturday, by showing movies for families two nights ago, by praying for each other, and in many other ways.

What is that mission to love one another going to encourage us to do next? Jesus taught forgiveness. How can we teach forgiveness? Jesus taught about the worth of all people. How do we teach that, too? How can we teach a love that is unconditional, and expects nothing in return?

At a recent youth group meeting, we were talking about Jesus’ parable in Luke about a banquet. How amazing is the unconditional love that would invite the poorest beggars to a rich feast.

I asked the youth if you can have unconditional love for people. They agreed that it was easy to have unconditional love for a baby, but when people got bigger, it got harder. The youth were split about whether it was possible to express unconditional love for people who were their age and up.

One of our youth said that it is possible to have unconditional love, because that’s what her church family has taught her. That means you: you have taught at least one youth what unconditional love means.

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3. Love God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind

Our mission is also to love God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind. Jesus said that, too.

How do we strengthen each other's spiritual lives? Do we promote prayer partners, like many people have exercise buddies? Do we encourage reading and Bible study? How do we feed Jesus' sheep spiritually?

4. And what vision do we hold before us to help us remember?

And if Jesus had just been teaching us for forty days, what vision would we have to help us keep on with our mission?

Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke of a dream of radical equality – that was his vision. But he also spoke of “beloved community,” community that heals people emotionally, that helps them cope with disappointments and defeats. I see a vision of beloved community that calls people accountable for the way they treat one another, a community that sets a standard of humility and hope.

What do you think? –

If you were to draw a picture of the vision that helps draw us toward living as the body of Christ, what would your picture be?

We live in an individualistic society, but the picture of salvation that the Bible gives us is never just an individualistic one. We are not saved alone. In Matthew 25, when Jesus talks about the great judgment, it is sheep on one side versus goats on the other; but not one sheep is singled out.

Jesus had 12 disciples, not just one.

So any vision of just “me and Jesus” is incomplete.

Our salvation depends upon one another. Our salvation depends on not being the greatest, but being a servant in relationship to others.

Maybe the best vision we can have is to really BE the body of Christ. It's hard, because we often see people as the problem, rather than the solution. We may have a history with some people in the body of Christ, a history that's not positive.

But we cannot live an abundant life without those people.

We cannot ignore the relationship, or we have become something other than Christian.

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Being the body of Christ means that we are connected to each other in a way that cannot be severed short of amputation. And you know what happens when you amputate; you leave the body handicapped.

If, in this time of polarization and mistrust in our public lives, you might wonder how we could live together as one body. How is it possible when we have strong Republicans and strong Democrats in the same congregation, and we know how divisive politics is right now.

But in the story of the ascension, there is a sign of hope.

In the ascension, Jesus gave his disciples a vision, but then he told them to wait for the power. They were in-between the resurrection and Pentecost. They had hope, but not yet the direction.

We, too, live in a time of in-between. The Kingdom of God is both among us and "not yet." So it is real, but there is lots of room for improvement.

So we don't have to be perfect yet. We just have to keep trying to be the body of Christ the very best we can.

Amen.

While Jesus' disciples were talking about what had happened, Jesus appeared and greeted them. They were frightened and terrified because they thought they were seeing a ghost.

But Jesus said, "Why are you so frightened? Why do you doubt? Look at my hands and my feet and see who I am! Touch me and find out for yourselves. Ghosts don't have flesh and bones as you see I have."

After Jesus said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. The disciples were so glad and amazed that they could not believe it. Jesus then asked them, "Do you have something to eat?" They gave him a piece of baked fish. He took it and ate it as they watched.

Jesus said to them, "While I was still with you, I told you that everything written about me in the Law of Moses, the Books of the Prophets, and in the Psalms had to happen." Then he helped them understand the Scriptures. He told them:

The Scriptures say that the Messiah must suffer, then three days later he will rise from death. They also say that all people of every nation must be told in my name to turn to God, in order to be forgiven. So beginning in Jerusalem, you must tell everything that has happened. I will send you the one my Father has promised, but you must stay in the city until you are given power from heaven.

Jesus led his disciples out to Bethany, where he raised his hands and blessed them. As he was doing this, he left and was taken up to heaven. After his

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disciples had worshiped him, they returned to Jerusalem and were very happy. They spent their time in the temple, praising God. (Luke 24:36-53, CEV)

"In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."" Acts 1:1-11, NRSV.