

New Spirit for New Life

Lk. 24:44-53

May 16, 2021

A story has been told about a Sunday school teacher teaching her class about Jesus' Ascension into heaven. During class that Sunday morning, she was taken aback by the question of a young would-be scientist. It was a little girl and she asked, "How fast was Jesus traveling when he ascended into the heavens?" Thinking a little too fast, the teacher responded, "Well, obviously he did not ascend faster than the speed of sound because the Bible says Jesus spoke words of blessing to the disciples as he departed." "Well, then," the precocious child replied, "in that case, Jesus isn't even there yet because the speed of sound is on average 767 miles per hour." Well, based on the little girl's conclusion I did some calculating...If Jesus was ascending at slower than the speed of sound he would travel 18,408 miles per day, or 6,718,920 miles per year or by now about 13,350,494,040 miles which is .25% of a light year... if my math is correct. A light year is 5.8 trillion miles. I guess heaven is pretty far away – at least a light year - in that child's mind!

As interesting as it might be, a scientific look at the Ascension of Jesus is not why we are here today. I'm not really going to say much about the details, yet the Ascension is an important story especially as we make our way to Pentecost. Its interesting tonote that Matthew and John don't include the Ascension in their gospels, and it's not in the shorter ending of Mark? Yet, in spite of this, its observance probably goes back to around the fourth century. Luke has some details of the ascension although parts of it are not in some of the better ancient manuscripts. It seems that the early believers were not concerned about the specific details of exactly when or how the Ascension happened. For them, Jesus' ascension was the completion of his work of redemption as he was taken up into glory and that was enough. Today we ask, what is enough for us? What most of us want and need to know is what the resurrection and ascension of our Lord means when we wake up in the morning and everything is wonderful, and when we wake up in the morning and everything is not. One Lutheran biblical scholar has said, "the early church never understood the Ascension of Jesus as a departure ceremony for a beloved teacher traveling to a distant and unknown land. Rather, it was seen as a further step in his glorification, from which the church could benefit." It especially did not mean that "Jesus was no longer with them." As Luke describes the Ascension, he gives no indication that the disciples were in any way upset or disappointed. Actually, they were happy and praised God. (And so) the Ascension did not only mean that Jesus had entered a new realm. It also meant that through it (the disciples) were going to participate in Christ's reign in a new way through (proclaiming and living the gospel). What God had been doing through Jesus in calling people to the kingdom God was now going to do through the disciples." And as Jesus rose and ascended so would the disciples in their life and ministry. In other words, as one way of life ended for Jesus and as he received a radically new life, so the disciples lives would be transformed. They were no longer followers of a man from Galilee, with whom they ate, walked, and could see and touch. They were now recipients of new life in a risen Christ. They were now ready to receive a new spirit given by God on Pentecost and ready to be sent out to continue Jesus' mission and so it is with us!

Regarding the Ascension of Jesus, fourth century early church father Augustine of Hippo said, “Jesus departed from our sight that he might return to our hearts. He departed, and behold, he is here.” That’s what matters on the good mornings and the bad mornings - that the risen Lord is present in the midst of all life - present when things change for the better or not... like being almost out of the pandemic, but still dealing with it... present in the midst of endings and beginnings like retirement, changing schools, or graduating... present in the midst of grief and growth like the loss of a relationship, age milestones, or life crises that lead to new pathways... Christ is with us through it all bringing healing, hope and new power for our lives of service in his name. The scripture we read from Luke is a good picture of this. Jesus stepped into the fear and bewilderment of the disciples, he offered them peace, he ate with them, he reaffirmed his death and resurrection as the fulfillment of scripture, and he commissioned them to proclaim the gospel of forgiveness. They had experienced their own life changes as they followed him. They had also grieved his death and found themselves lost and wondering what was next. They were scared, surprised, and confused at the news of his resurrection, and now here he was – the same, but different – not a ghost Luke says and yet not a continuation of his worldly existence. He ate some fish with them, then was carried up to heaven. They were learning to live into resurrection – that God brings life even out of death – that Christ is risen – they were learning to let go of what it was like to walk with him, ask him questions, share meals with him, and they would now be trusting that his presence would be with them in a new yet just as real way – maybe even more real. They would now find his grace and presence within at any moment and any time.

Someone once said, “sometimes no one can help us in our inner woundedness and fear...and sometimes we are too paralyzed to even open the door.” This story tells us that Jesus can reach through any locked door. He comes in when we are in those places of fear and bewilderment - and he brings peace, meets us at his table, leads us into new life, and empowers us and sends us to serve and love just like he did. That’s how the Ascension leads us to Pentecost. Jesus has come and still comes and by grace lifts us up and transforms our mourning into dancing, our sorrow into joy, our confusion into clarity. In Christ, we are on the journey of living into this new spirit that is being born in us and Christ empowers us to share the life that God gives. If we’ve been on the faith journey for a while, we have some familiarity with this process even though we may not have named it this way. But we know. We have been through some of these kinds of endings and beginnings - staff changes, members moving, job shifts, dry times in our spiritual lives - and although we may not have noticed it along the way we can look back and see how God has been with us. Sometimes others see it before we do and say things like – she has “a new lease on life,” or “even though it was tough, he has come out stronger,” or “when one door closed for her another opened.” And as Luke tells us, for Jesus, it all meant continuing to love and serve as he did.

We’ve all heard about the characterization of many people today who see themselves as “being spiritual but not religious.” Based on people I’ve talked to who characterize themselves this way, I think a clearer rendering may be “spiritual but not institutional.” Spirituality and religious practice go hand in hand. Mindfulness, or prayer and actively caring about things are two sides of the same coin. Spiritual people are looking for connection with the divine and a life that is reflected by that connection. The Ascension story reminds us of the spiritual, yet life transforming message of Christ who sought to

draw all unto God and send them out in compassion and service to the hurting and broken. Our deep communion with God is an encounter with a self-sacrificial love - the kind that gives of oneself for the other. I have a friend who might use that phrase spiritual, but not religious and he is one of the most engaged people I know in attending to the brokenness of the world.

Early church father St. Augustine had it right - "Jesus departed from our sight that he might return to our hearts. He departed, and behold, he is here." And when Jesus is here we are not only in communion with God, but we are in communion with our neighbor and the stranger as we live in the love of Christ for the world.