

Sermon on Luke 24:44-53
Feast of the Ascension, Sunday, May 16, 2010
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

One of my favorite “lines” in all scripture is from today’s gospel. It was spoken by those two persons (either “men” or “angels”) who seemed to appear out of nowhere as the disciples are looking up into the sky at the ascending Lord Jesus, presumably awestruck as our Lord floats upwards into heaven. (Face it, you and I would be looking upwards, too, seeking one last glimpse of him, and wondering “what’s next?”). All of a sudden two men in white robes appear standing next to them, who say: “People 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.” In other words, enough staring upwards into the sky. You’re not accomplishing anything that way. Jesus will come again when he comes, and your looking upwards will not bring him back down to earth any sooner. So let’s go and do what he said, wait in Jerusalem for the promised power from on high, so that we obey his command to “proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem, then to Samaria and to the ends of the earth.” Because you are witnesses, and witnesses don’t just stand there looking and waiting for something to happen. Witnesses go and testify to others about what they have seen. Witnesses are not passive onlookers; they are testifiers - they tell the story to the world (not just a courtroom)

Don’t you think that these angels, or men, or women, whoever they were, could also be speaking to us, and giving us the same challenge? For they seem to be speaking to a common temptation for Christians when we gather for worship: we, too, seem to spend a lot of our time together gazing on the beauty of our worship space, or reflecting on the ponderous profundity of being in the presence of God and each other. (In other words, sometimes too much of our attention is placed on the importance of what we are doing here together in worship, and gazing upon the beauty of our stained glass windows, floral decorations and colorful banners, without a thought to what goes on outside. Or, in urban churches like ours, you and I may be looking at the ceiling counting how many light bulbs are burned out, how much paint is peeling off three stories above us, and what color we should paint that space if we could ever afford or dare go up there and do it!) Our Extreme Makeover focus is too much on the sanctuary and too little on the world!

All kidding aside, the angels’ challenge seems to characterize a common tension between the two primary purposes for the people of God who gather as “the Church”: one, to worship God as people of faith in God’s holy house; and

two, to go out into the world as witnesses for God telling the good news of repentance and forgiveness of sins to all the world. And we are torn around this, pulled in two directions by these two powerful forces that both draw us here to gather in this place, and the gospel that sends us out to share the story with others. On the one hand, we have the Westminster Confession as it appears in the Book of Common Prayer, which states that the “chief end of humankind is to glorify and worship God” (that our chief purpose as God’s highest creatures is to praise and thank our Creator). And then we have Jesus’ Great Commission, in which our Lord Jesus says to all of us, his followers, to “go therefore and make disciples of all nations, teaching them what God commands, and baptize them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

So there you have it: two competing, powerful forces in the Church and within ourselves. Which force shall it be that directs us? Which force will “win” in the Church? Can we possibly do both??? Ah, that is a very good question!

On this day of “opening fishing” in Minnesota, I can hardly resist an analogy around fishing. For the chief purpose in life for a person who loves to fish (commonly called a “fisherman” or “fisherwoman”) is to actually “fish” – to do what one is “called to do”. So what is most important for a fisherman or woman? You could say it is to praise God for creating our beautiful lakes and environment for fishing, and so you come to the church to thank God in prayer and sing songs of thanksgiving. Or, you take off for the whole weekend and “go, therefore out onto the 10,000 lakes and streams of Minnesota (and Wisconsin) to fish!” Who is the true fisherman? You could argue both cases, but it does seem clear that the purpose of the fisherman is to go fishing. So, what about the purpose of a Christian, of a disciple? It seems less clear, because we know that we are certainly created and called to worship God for the gift of life and for God’s Son. But we also know that the purpose of a disciple is to follow the Master, which is Jesus, who sends you and me and all his followers to go out into the world, to be his witnesses. In other words, to “go out and fish!” Or, in this case, go outside these doors and share the good news of God’s love with others, with our neighbors, our friends and family, indeed to all the world! So today’s lesson from the gospel this Feast of the Ascension, and certainly next Sunday on the Feast of Pentecost, remind us to spend less of God’s precious time inside these doors looking up at the ceilings and more time following our Lord Jesus outside into the world! To be blown by the Spirit’s breath out these doors and out with our neighbors, which, on this beautiful day, we are all most anxious to do!

So I am not going to spend a lot more of your precious time belaboring this point. But I do want to say one more thing about the *content* of our witness. What is it that Jesus wants you and me to share with the world, if we are not to spend more than one hour of our time each week inside this sanctuary of worship. (Oh,

and I do agree that this time worshipping together is important – in fact it’s vital – and one hour a week is the least we can do to honor and praise our Lord for the gift of life and the salvation of our souls!). Can I get an “amen”?

But now, about the message that we share. It’s the good news of God’s love, given to us in the person of Jesus Christ, who came to show us how to live by his example and by his words. It’s the message of God’s compassion for all God’s creatures, and for every person – man, woman, and child – on earth, regardless of name, creed, culture, race, ethnicity, gender or orientation. It’s the message of forgiveness and reconciliation, by which God has reached out to us through God’s Son, and desires us to reach out to one another with love and forgiveness as well. It’s a love that reaches out to our perceived enemies as well as our friends and family. To go out of here with this message of compassion and love as God’s hands and feet, to make this world a better, more loving place is part of our call as disciples of Jesus. To follow Jesus out these doors to share God’s forgiveness, acceptance, and love with all those who live out there, our neighbors, our brothers and sisters. To make the connection between what we hear and what we pray inside these doors with our lives out there, and with those who live outside.

So let me share one small example of what I mean. This past week most of us were shocked and angered to hear what our sister in Christ, Gloria Fuchs experienced in her own backyard. Gloria is a 91-year-old woman, the widow of one of our deceased members, Jake Fuchs. Last week when she was home in her garage after running errands, Gloria heard a voice of someone saying “hello”. Being a kind, and friendly person, Gloria turned to return the greeting. Then the man punched her in the face, took her purse, and left her lying on the floor of her garage. Gloria called 911, was brought to the hospital, and fortunately sustained no real injuries – except now she is experiencing shock, fear, and a wonder at how someone could do anything like this. When her neighbors and the community heard about this, they were outraged. The same goes for all of us. Many of you have responded with shock, anger, and compassion for Gloria. She has received many supportive phone calls, she is undoubtedly receiving many cards and notes of support, and we are praying for her here. This is all good. But what do we do about all the anxiety and fear that so many other “Gloria’s” feel when they may live in not so peaceful a neighborhood as she? What do we do about the many children who come home to an empty house where there is no food to eat, or falling behind in school; or the mother who is beaten by her husband or partner but has to stay home and not leave, in order to protect her children? What do we do about the anxiety so many feel about the anger and hostility directed at them because they may be an immigrant, or an undocumented “alien”, simply trying to support their family? How do we take the compassion and righteous anger that we feel for someone we know and love, like Gloria, and use it to include those whom

we don't personally know but who have experienced just as much violence or pain, but have no real hope for justice? What can we do as a community of faith to protect vulnerable people and lessen the violence that makes so many people afraid, and build a stronger community with safer neighborhoods, dismantle racism and the oppression that infects us? So many of you asked me by phone or by email "what can we do?" when you heard about what happened to Gloria. How do we take that question and ask "what can we do as people of faith" to address what happens to so many people out there in our community?

That seems to be the question the angels might ask you and me today, as we gather in worship today. We are doing a good thing, focusing our thoughts and prayers on God and our neighbors, singing our praises and asking for God's direction in our lives. But the angels might ask, "why do you *stay here* staring at the altar or the stained glass windows, when Jesus has called you and me to go out and make disciples, sharing the good news of Jesus' love with our many neighbors, and *acting as neighbors* by bringing God's justice and compassion to the world outside? That's where our work through Isaiah and as a congregation begins!

So I'll leave that question with you today, this Feast of the Ascension. Let's take that question "what can I do, pastor?" that you may have had for Gloria, or another friend in your life experiencing pain, and ask "what can I do to make a difference in the world out there" with love for my neighbor, and for the common good? When the angels challenged the disciples, they left that mountaintop and prepared themselves to receive power from the Holy Spirit. They did go out and make disciples in all the world, as Jesus commanded them. Today the angels challenge us as well, to go and be witnesses to the world for God's compassion, justice, and love for neighbor. So what will you and I do about that? Amen.