

Sermon on Luke 24:44-53, Acts 1:1-11
Feast of the Ascension, Sunday, June 2, 2019
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace be to you from God, our Mother and our Father, and our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Ascension of our Lord is one of the most neglected of feast days in the Church today. It doesn't help that it always takes place on a Thursday, ten days prior to the Feast of Pentecost, the celebration of God's gift of the Holy Spirit to the followers of Jesus – which occurs on the 50th day of Easter. It also doesn't help that we are used to gathering for worship on Sundays, and find ourselves busy with too many other things to bother with the remembrance of Jesus ascending into heaven 40 days after he rose from the dead. I mean, who does that? We are in the midst of the NBA finals, we are busy with our working lives and preoccupied by many things – if God can't focus on his mighty acts done on Sunday, how can we be expected to focus on them? We tend to compartmentalize our lives into our home and family lives, our working lives, our public lives, and our spiritual lives. If we focus our attention on God's work through Jesus on Sunday mornings between 10 am and noon, how can God expect us to be able to pull ourselves away from our usual activities at home, work, and out in the world on a Thursday afternoon or evening? And who really believes that Jesus (or anyone else) has ascended into heaven in front of his disciples very eyes, so soon after rising from the dead, anyway? I am being facetious, of course.

So let's look back at those disciples, who are the main subjects of Jesus' words this Ascension Sunday, when we say "*we believe he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father?*" On recent Sundays we have read accounts of how, soon after the resurrection, Peter and the disciples decided to get out of Jerusalem and go fishing. It was what they knew how to do best, after all! On that occasion they encountered the risen Jesus by the shore, who told them where to cast their fishing nets after a long night of catching no fish, so that by following Jesus' directions their nets suddenly became full of fish!

In this story, we hear how the disciples went to Galilee as Jesus had told them to do, listened to him speak, then followed him as far as Bethany, where he blessed them and was carried up into heaven. Luke said that the disciples watched all this, worshiped Jesus, then returned joyfully to Jerusalem, where they went to the Temple daily to worship God, on a spiritual "high", which probably couldn't last. To me, it seems only a matter of time before they all said, "*now what?*" After all that excitement following that devastating Good Friday, and the surprise of Jesus' Easter resurrection, what would *you* do?

In the book of the Acts of the Apostles, we heard how Jesus told his disciples that they would receive power from the Holy Spirit, and would become his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Then they watched Jesus being lifted up into heaven, out of sight. And while they were still looking up, two men in white robes (presumable angels) stood by them and asked them “*Why do you stand looking up into heaven?*” Stop looking up into the sky, and get moving! (Don’t just stand there! DO something!) It’s one of my favorite passages in the New Testament.

Why? Because it raises the paradox of our faith: we love to do as we are called to do – love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and worship only him. This is our highest calling – the “chief end of humankind”, to thank and praise our Creator for the gift of life. But we are at the same time commanded to love our neighbor as ourselves, which we cannot do if we stand gazing into heaven – we have to look around us and listen for our neighbor’s need. Was that what the angels were pointing out to the apostles after Jesus’ ascension into heaven? It’s not clear, but it’s clearly a possibility, knowing Jesus’ teaching.

So what does the Ascension of our Lord teach us today? It clearly shows how Jesus has been raised into heaven to be with God. But is that the only place where Jesus is? From other passages in scripture, this is clearly not the case! Jesus also promised his disciples that “*I will be with you always, to the end of the age.*” He can’t be with us if he is only in heaven, can he? Who can be in two places at once? Well, God can be! And so can Jesus – because he has promised to be with us, to be present wherever two or more of us are gathered in his name, and that he will come again on the last day to bring peace and justice to all the earth. So Jesus must be everywhere, today and in the future, right?

Today we continue to meet in church sanctuaries to worship God and praise God for all that God has done. We praise Jesus our Lord in heaven, and look for his presence among us, not only in the Word of God’s good news or in the bread and wine of Holy Communion, but also in the faces of our neighbors, both in their needs and in the face of Christ that we may see in them.

The easiest thing for Christians to do is to worship God in heaven as we gather to worship. It is what we are called and expected to do, and this is the most comfortable act of faith that we experience – that and our prayers raised to God. We expect to experience God in our church sanctuaries and in the temples, synagogues and mosques of this world, led by our ministers and priests in prayer! But to see Jesus present in our world, and in the needs and faces of our neighbor, well, that’s quite another thing! We need to look with new eyes of faith to see that!

This takes you and me out of the usual realm of “church”, seeking to experience God’s presence in Christ Jesus, not only in the church building, or

Word and Sacrament. Here the Holy Spirit takes us to new places, outside of our usual experience. So we need to open our eyes and ears to new possibilities, and let our imaginations flow!

Think about where, outside of this place of worship, you have seen God's work, or evidence of Jesus' presence. Where has God's work been done in the world – where we are used to seeing the devil's work, plenty of pain and suffering, and the absence of faith and faithfulness? Sometimes it happens downstairs or elsewhere in the church building, when we host ministries such as Project Home, where families sleep in churches and synagogues because they have lost their housing. Sometimes we see Jesus' face in the person who comes to the church out of need – for food, clothing, transportation or housing. I think Jesus is present in the young adults who come every week night to our Learning Center for support groups that help them reclaim their lives from addiction, to stay “clean” from drugs, and look to God or a “higher power” for strength. I have heard from some of them how these gatherings help them save their lives. So the face of Jesus could be seen in the one seeking help from God in their suffering, or perhaps in those who walk with them in their pain and help reclaim their lives as children of God.

But I know it doesn't only happen here or in houses of worship that Jesus shows up! I think Jesus is present in all kinds of places, where we aren't thinking to look! Just like Jesus was found as a child in Bethlehem, on the night he was born – who would expect to find him there, and not a king's palace in Jerusalem? Who would expect the Son of God to grow up as a carpenter's son in Nazareth, which we would never have heard of if not for the gospels that told of his life? Who would expect Jesus, the Messiah of God, to sit at a well in Samaria with a woman who had been married at least seven times before? Who would seek God's Son eating in the homes of Pharisees, tax collectors and sinners to share the good news, or calling fishermen to be his disciples – were there no possible students in the Temple schools or rabbinic schools in Jerusalem? The Holy Spirit surely found strange places to raise up faithful followers for this Messiah of God!

Which means that we need to look in new, unexpected places for Jesus to show up, in the people who live out there in our communities, who may not even know that God is seeking them out! For how did God find you, anyway? Were you destined to be a disciple, or was it an accident that you found your way here? I have found it really fascinating that I have found faith in young people out in the community where faith is not a “given” – and totally unexpected. I have been surprised and inspired by the faithfulness to God that I have found in Muslim imams and other followers of Islam whom I have met in the past year – who share many of my same values of God's justice and mercy, along with compassion for the poor and for immigrants seeking new lives in a strange land.

I guess my point is this: maybe we have been staring up into the heavens, or the ceilings of our Lutheran sanctuaries too long to see Jesus' presence in our neighbors outside. I think God is calling us to open our eyes to new possibilities for faith – in the neighbors we may never expect. For the good news of the gospel always seems to be in the unexpected mercy of God being shared with unexpected people in unexpected ways, in unexpected places at any given time! May that good news come to you, and may it be shared through you and me to others, and one day, to the whole world! Thanks be to God! Amen.