

**Sermon – Ascension Sunday**  
**Acts 1:1-11**  
**June 2, 2019**  
**“The Jerusalem Address”**

In the Gospel of Luke, there are four events that are of particular importance, so the church dedicates a special day to their observance. The first is the Baptism of Jesus, observed on the Sunday after Epiphany. The second is the Transfiguration of Jesus, observed on the Sunday before Lent. The most important is the Resurrection of Jesus on Easter Sunday, and there is one more - important enough to be mentioned in the Apostle’s Creed - the Ascension of Jesus.

We overlook it because in Acts, Luke says it took place 40 days after Jesus’ resurrection, likely a figure of speech, but 40 days from Easter is always a Thursday. And attendance at Thursday evening worship services in late May hasn’t been so great. The Ascension is important enough to have merited a visit from the same fellows who announced the resurrection – a subtle detail and likewise easy to miss. Assumed to be angels, but Luke just says “*two men in white robes.*”

In the story of the Resurrection, the men relay to the women at the tomb whose faces are bowed to the ground that Jesus is going ahead of them to Galilee – there they will see him. In the story of the Ascension, the men tell the 11 remaining apostles that Jesus will return. The not-so-subtle message in both events is that Jesus, who everyone thinks has gone away – hasn’t. But his presence with them is dramatically different than it had been.

The late Eugene Peterson, author of the popular version of the Bible known as “The Message”, translated Job 9:11, the anguish of Job in the midst of his suffering, this way; “*Job didn’t question whether God existed. He only wondered why he couldn’t find him. ‘Somehow, though he moves right in front of me, I don’t see him, quietly but surely he’s active, and I miss it.’*” Job suffered many evils, but there is no shortage of situations in life that can veil the presence of God to us. The eyes of our heart that look in faith toward God suffer blurred vision. And yet, Peterson writes, “*most of the things that are true, you can’t see – the whole invisible world of grace, love, and justice.*”

The Ascension appears to be a story of God’s departure. Earth and its people – a nice place to visit but I wouldn’t want to live there. But that would be a mistake. The Ascension it is a vital piece of the story of how God works in the world. No one who witnessed Jesus being “*taken from them*” on the cross ever expected they’d see him again. Peterson writes, with regard to Job’s (and the apostle’s) dilemma, “*we underestimate God when we overestimate evil. We don’t see what God is doing and so conclude that he is doing nothing. We do see everything evil is doing and think it’s in control of everyone.*” Seeing the resurrected Jesus challenged that thinking!

God was very much “doing something” on the cross – defeating the evil that put him there for one thing. He was with them – and they clearly expected that to continue. Then they see Jesus “taken away” from them again. Implied in question of the disciples in Acts 1:6 about this being

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“the time” when Israel is restored was the belief that when Messiah comes, and Jesus was now clearly Messiah to them – evil and suffering would get it’s \_\_ kicked!

But it didn’t – both are still quite alive and kicking. It takes a great deal of effort – and by that I mean faith – to steer our eyes away from what’s wrong with the world or painful in our lives and toward promises like Easter’s “*he is going ahead of you to Galilee, there you will see him,*” or The Ascension’s “*the same Jesus you see taken up from you will come again, in the same (sudden) way you saw him leave.*” But that’s the faith of the church, the faith we confess when we are baptized. In the meantime we look around and pay particular attention to anyone who is suffering and that evil seems have particularly set its sights on.

That’s our call – that is how we spend “the meantime” till our faith shall be our sight. A song by Christian artist Brandon Heath says; “*Give me your eyes for just one second, give me your eyes so I can see. Everything that I keep missing, give me your love for humanity. Give me your arms for the broken-hearted, the ones that are far beyond my reach. Give me your heart for the ones forgotten. Give me your eyes so I can see.*”

I once again have the pleasure of announcing the consecration of Stephen Ministers in our congregation this weekend. Stephen Ministry is one of those ways in which the lament of Job, and an understandable perception of many people today that God is absent to them, is answered. I wish you could hear what our current ministers and care receivers are saying - evidence to my ears that the invisible world of grace and love is quite real. This is also the start of our congregation’s Mission Servant Month. Available to you are dozens of ways you can show that you see the things Jesus saw. Hunger, addiction, deployment, poverty and human slavery are quite real and quite isolating. It controls a lot of people’s lives. So is the invisible kingdom of grace, love and justice – which controls you.

On November 19, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln gave one of the most magnificent speeches in American history. His Gettysburg Address was given to consecrate a battlefield and a resting place for the dead. Lincoln knew he could offer no words to meet so great a task. So he called upon the living to do the consecrating, to carry on as he put it “unfinished work.”

Jesus Christ is not here – he is risen, and he is ascended. But he did not die in vain – his incomparably great power lives in you, who choose to carry on the cause for which Jesus gave his life. AMEN