

SERMON – ASCENSION DAY/7TH EASTER
LUKE 24:44-53 & ACTS 1:1-11
MAY 24, 2020

“THOSE ARMS...ALWAYS REMEMBER THOSE ARMS”

Most of you listening right now have memories of extraordinary events in national or world history – the more the years, the more “*I remember when’s...*” you’ve got tucked away. “*I was in middle school when...I was in the dentist office waiting room when...I was about the start a meeting at work when...I’d just come in from mowing the lawn when...*” My mom said she was at church rehearsing a Sunday School Christmas program when the announcement came over the radio about Pearl Harbor. My dad was bowling what he later described as a pretty good series when a guy over the bowling alley P.A. said; “*phone call for Cliff Nelson.*” It was mom...it was time to go to the hospital it seems and have a little boy. I’ll let you guess who that was! Let’s just say *I don’t remember that!*

But I’ve got a fair number of “*I remember when’s*” myself – foggy memories of JFK in 63...better ones of RFK and MLK in 68, Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin in 69, Munich Olympics in 72, Watergate in 74, the US embassy in Tehran in 79, the Challenger in 86, Black Friday in 87 and of course 9-11-01. Now this – not a sudden event but all the same unforgettable – the quarantining of a nation because of an invisible virus. Our IT, AI, medically sophisticated world has been caught off guard. In the immediate aftermath of a events like these folks wonder “now what.” After 9-11 I didn’t walk into a café or store in Spencer, Nebraska where I was living without hearing “*I wonder if...I heard that...I wouldn’t be surprised if...or a buddy of mine who works for the state said...*”

It’s way too early to talk of a “post COVID 19” world, but not too early to wonder what’ll change for good or just for a while, what for the better and what for the worse. Normal is such a vague term anyway – mine and yours might be similar but unlikely the same – even so now the phrase “new normal” is all the rage. After the 1918 “Spanish Flu” (so called because Spanish journalists were the first to report it) nations centralized health care in one form or another – and it’s even suggested Europe decided it might be time to end the First World War since so many soldiers were dying of the flu in the trenches. Ironic I suppose, but hey, a “silver lining” is a silver lining.

I want to talk today about this stage our world’s “what’s next” with one of history’s most important “what’s next/I remember when” stories – the Ascension of our Lord. Luke alone provides a description of it – important enough though for him to mention it not once but twice and for the church to include in its’ creeds. The reason the Ascension of our Lord is so important is not the manner of his departure, but that it fulfilled a promise. Jesus said in John 14 and 15 that he would “go away” if when he did, he would send “another” – a helper, a counselor.

In our lesson from Luke Jesus says when he goes away, he’ll send “*power from on high*” – a reference to the Holy Spirit. The Ascension completes the mission of Jesus on earth and prepares the earth for the Holy Spirit. Yet it’s the Holy Spirit that brings Jesus to the world – through the church, so even though he’s ascended, Jesus has not so much left the earth as transformed his presence in it. Now he looks and sounds like you and I. Christ has ascended not to leave us but to always be with us – “*I will not leave you orphans*” he said in John 14.

The very last thing the disciples of our Lord saw was his hands uplifted blessing them. They were left with that image and would live the rest of their lives under them. But not just them – you and I too, and that is why this is such a “I remember when/now what” moment even for us. Those hands uplifted as our Lord ascended were not just for his chosen near Bethany but for all who would come to faith by what they did and said.

What then are the “now what” assurances of the Ascension – even if for you and I it wasn’t a “I remember when” moment? How will this great event help us navigate the “now what” moment we’re in right now? I suggest the following:

Remember always that you too live under Christ’s hands of blessing – because you believe in him and were baptized in his name. This pandemic has isolated us one from another and may continue to do so for a time. “Wait here” Jesus said to his first disciples, and I will come to you. This allowed them to calmly wait for his promise to be fulfilled. You have that same calming Spirit yet make no mistake, it is still a Spirit of power, to allow you to live into “what next” phase of our current world.

The Ascension invites our worship. Not that the resurrected Lord does or did not – but this event is the first recorded time when Jesus disciples worshipped Jesus and didn’t simply learn from Him. Now they knew He was God’s own Son, Luke says in Acts 1:3 he gave them “many convincing proofs” of his resurrection, but when ascended he took his place “on the right hand of God the Father” as we confess. But remember those hands of blessing – they have not relaxed, they are not folded in some comfortable, divine repose, they still bless. In heaven is your forgiver but also your friend and your keeper.

The Ascended Lord said “go back to Jerusalem.” Bethany would have been a more pleasant place to hang out – Jerusalem was where the accusers and crucifiers of Jesus were, the air over that city hung with suspicion and hostility. It was the hands of blessing that let them go confidently back – and they are the same ones that will lead us confidently, if carefully, into the “new normal” we’ll live with for a while – or longer. Life after worship is often a difficult, monotonous, tedious or gray one. I need not rehearse again the challenges of the current pandemic, and you had problems when this whole thing started. But even in hard or demanding times, return to this – my Lord has his hands of blessing upon me – he wants me where I am, he accompanies and uses me where I am.

Which leads to the final point about the Ascension – it led God’s followers to the church. Luke closes his gospel with the words “and they were continually in the Temple blessing God.” An odd way perhaps to close a book – but picture it will you. Men and women with a vision of their ascended forgiver and a promise – that was all they had. That’s not a little mind you, but that is what the church lives on, feeds on, presses on with – a vision of an ascended Savior and a promise that he will be continually blessing and keeping you.

It’s entirely appropriate for us to ask “what next” questions of our world. Students wondering if they will be able to return to school in the fall – high school graduates wondering if the college they choose will receive them and how – newly minted degree holders wondering if and when a job will become available, and all of us wondering when the familiar faces of our friends or co-workers will reappear and more importantly, if their familiar voices are safe to hear. And when will the church again do what it does best...sing?

For this too the Ascension story gives us its aid – wait, wait and pray for the power of God to do what God in Christ does best – bless. What’s next? The disciples of Jesus could not have known. We may not either, but like them we know whose arms are lifted up and blessing us. The peace of the Lord be with you now and always. AMEN