

You Are My Witnesses

Easter 7; Series A

Acts 1:12-26

“You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea...”

Acts 1:8

“He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father.” These words come from the Nicene Creed that we just confessed a short while ago. The ascension of Jesus is part of what we believe and confess about Jesus as Christians. We believe and trust in an ascended Lord. Although Ascension Day was last Thursday, today in the Church we remember the event of Jesus’ ascension as it took place forty days after his resurrection. We heard a description of this event in our first reading from the Book of Acts.

I have a hunch that a lot of us as Christians are unclear about Jesus’ ascension and its meaning for the Church and for our lives as Christians. Why did he ascend to his Father in heaven? Why did he leave his disciples and all of us Christians here on earth? Why did he not just take the Church with him?

So today in the sermon I want to focus on the event of Jesus’ ascension by dividing our sermon in two parts. In the first part of the sermon I want to focus on the question, “Why did Jesus ascend to his Father in heaven and leave the Church and her members on earth?” In the second part of the sermon I want to emphasize one of the meanings of the ascension of Jesus in order to interpret the ascension personally for our lives. To aid in this purpose I want to show you a renaissance era painting of the event to illustrate the challenge of living individually as Christians and as the Church in the wake of our Lord’s ascension.

So why did Jesus ascend into heaven and leave his baptized believers, the church, on earth? The Bible gives us primarily four answers to this question. First, Jesus ascended to prepare a place in heaven for those who believe in Him. Jesus is our forerunner. This gives us certainty of everlasting life (John 14:2-3; Hebrews 6:18-20). Second, Jesus ascended to Intercede or mediate for us before the Father (He is our Priest--Romans 8:34-35; 1 John 2:1-2). Third, Jesus ascended to sit down at the right hand of God to rule over His Church and the entire universe (He is our King--Ephesians 1:20-23; Philippians 2:6-11). Fourth, Jesus ascended to send people to speak the saving Gospel by the power of the Holy Spirit (He is our Prophet—Ephesians 4:10-12; John 16:6-8; John 20:21-23; Acts 1:8; Luke 10:16).

This last answer to the question, “Why did Jesus ascend into heaven and leave the church on earth?” is the one that our first reading from the book of Acts emphasizes. Jesus ascended to send people, even you and me, to speak the saving Gospel by the power of his Holy Spirit. In our reading we hear that the apostles had gathered together with Jesus in Jerusalem within the forty days between his resurrection and his ascension into heaven. At this congregational meeting the apostles ask Jesus a question to which he responds by basically telling them what is going to happen. He predicts their immediate future. He says, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Jesus has work for his Church and her members to do, even as he will soon leave them. Why did Jesus ascend into heaven and leave his church

on earth? He did so in order to send his church and her members out to carry on his mission of bringing the saving message of the Gospel to all people.



This then brings us to the second part of our sermon—the challenge of speaking the saving Gospel both as individual Christians in our vocations as well as together as the Church. The painting titled *The Ascension of Christ* (1510-1520) by Benvenuto Tisi Garofalo illustrates so wonderfully the challenge that you and I face individually and that we face together as the Church to speak the Gospel and carry forth the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations. This is a brilliant depiction of Jesus' Ascension for at least this one reason: all the disciples are pointing in a different direction. If the images on the canvas were to come alive, we might hear something like this: "Hey! Let's go this way! There are people over there!" "No! Jesus said go to Jerusalem. Let's go this way!" "Look, I see two angels! Wait a minute, are those angels yelling at us?"

This painting captures the confusion, fear, and challenge that the disciples experienced after Christ's Ascension. They frantically pointed in every direction, speculating what their next move should be. Life as a disciple will be much different for them without their Lord with them in flesh and blood, teaching, commanding, and guiding them. Now they are afraid of what to do next. Now they are confused about who should be leading and where they should be going. What a challenge! In their confusion and fear they seemed to have forgotten the very words of Jesus telling them what to do next and promising that they would have help to do it. Let's listen again. Before his ascension into heaven he told his disciples, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). In the midst of their confusion and fear the words of Jesus and the promise he gave were present.

You and I face this same challenges and questions about what to do and how to live as Christians and together as congregation, don't we? Sometimes we might think it would just be much easier if God gave us cue cards or clear signs as to what he expects us to do next. Or maybe it would be good if there was a giant buzzer that would make a noise every time we are doing something that we are not supposed to be doing. It is a challenge and a struggle to honor a Heavenly Father that we cannot see. And so we might be so tempted to become our own authority and succumb to our own desires of what to do and how to live. We might be tempted to follow where everyone else is pointing, thinking that if the majority of the people are doing it or thinking it or saying it then it must be true, as if the majority opinion is our ultimate authority. We might see others pointing to self-help books that give us answers to our struggles and vices. In the confusion of our lives there is the tendency to listen to all kinds of ideas, voices, and opinions about what to do and how to live.

As a congregation it can be easy for us to go in all kinds of different directions and listen to all kinds of opinion, ideas, and voices of how to do ministry and how to grow a church numerically. It can be easy for us to give into the temptation to make our mission about pleasing people, satisfying the felt needs of the members. It could be easy for us to simply not do anything, "Don't rock the boat!" we might here some saying. This is part of the value of the strategic plan that the congregation recently adopted. A carefully thought out plan based on the Bible that answers basic questions about who

we are as a parish, why we exist, and what we are going to do keeps us focused on the mission of God. A plan keeps us aligned, moving together in the same direction, pooling our resources together, being good stewards.

In the midst of our lives as Christians and life together as members of Atonement Lutheran, there is the tendency to forget that the words and the promise of Jesus are for us as well—"You will be my witnesses" and "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you." The Christian life is a challenge. It is often a struggle between the desires of the Spirit that live inside of us that call us to honor God and his Will for our lives and the desires of the flesh that live inside of us, calling us to live a life of self-gratification and pleasure. All the while, Jesus gave us his Word and a Promise to believe and trust in. All the while we have a Word of promise to believe and trust in. The very one who is the Word become flesh has come through his innocent suffering and death to stand as a witness and testify for you, not against you. You have a word of forgiveness from your God to trust in. The very one who is the Word become flesh has come to bring resurrection life for you through his life. The very one who is the Word become flesh and was baptized in the Spirit of God has ascended into heaven so that his Spirit good be given personally to you. Baptized into Christ and his Holy Spirit now you are a witness that is empowered, enabled, and forgiven. Now he is still with us in flesh and blood even though he has ascended to our Father in heaven. He gives us his flesh and blood, the very presence of Jesus to sustain us in our challenging travels as Christians. He fulfills his promise to give us exactly what he says he will—the Holy Spirit.

Living a Christian life in which our Lord has ascended can be confusing and challenging. All kinds of arrows and people are pointing and pulling in different directions. In the midst of it do not neglect to come and hear the Word of God and receive the gifts of his grace. Do not neglect to grow in knowledge of his Word. Listen and believe in his Promise. It is your constant. Come and receive the real presence of your God in the bread and wine, even as he has ascended in heaven. As his witness, let God empower, enable, and forgive you through his Spirit. This is how we live individually and as the Church in the wake of the ascension of Jesus. Amen.