

Luke 24:44-53, 2017

⁴⁴Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you — that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." ⁴⁵Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

⁴⁸You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

⁵⁰Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. ⁵¹While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. ⁵²And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; ⁵³and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Luke 24:44-53, 2017

St. Augustine said this in a sermon on the Ascension:

“Today Jesus Christ our Lord went up to heaven; let our hearts go up with him. Listen to the words of St. Paul.

“If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.””

I wonder if this is not one of the best messages we can receive as we commemorate the ascension of our Lord Jesus;

“...let our hearts go up with him.”

I decided that today we would commemorate the ascension of Jesus, a remembrance that always falls on the Thursday before the last Sunday of the Easter season,

40 days after the crucifixion.

I have never preached on this set of passages because at the churches I have served we have not had a worship service on Ascension Day.

What we typically do is make the move from the crucifixion to the resurrection of Jesus, and then to Pentecost and the beginning of the church.

When we do this we skip over this part of the story that is also important.

So, this has been an opportunity for me to study and learn more closely what this ascension of Jesus means for us as Christians.

Is this festival of the ascension important at all,
or are we just too busy to take the time for
Ascension Day?

It is interesting that Luke is the only gospel that has an ascension story, the one we just heard.

The story gets repeated in the Acts lesson we also heard.

We all know that at the heart of our confession and belief is the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus,

and then after that in the founding of the church at Pentecost.

But, this event is far from being unimportant for a number of reasons.

First off, what we notice is the disciples are transformed.

After this experience the disciples are no longer the terrified and timid band of believers they were during the period of post resurrection appearances of Jesus,
vacillating back and forth between belief and non-belief.

Jesus, as he talks to them, opens their minds up to the scriptures,

the law of Moses, the messages of the prophets and the psalms

and what they say about Jesus' suffering and rising,
and about the repentance and forgiveness that is to be proclaimed after these events.

These disciples then go back to Jerusalem with great joy,
to the temple where they were continually blessing God and waiting for what God has promised,
The Holy Spirit.

Being at the temple may not have been a particularly out of the ordinary thing for these disciples,

but their praising, praying and waiting is their expression of joyous unity with the mind and heart of Christ

that happened when Jesus opened their minds to the scriptures,
and that makes their anticipation of being in the infinity of God particular, concrete and embodied in their lives.

This is real for them now,
they have witnessed and experienced the ascension of Christ!

This event also transformed the message.

It is pivotal in the movement toward the beginning of the proclamation of salvation through the resurrected Jesus Christ

and announcing Jesus as Lord and savior as the disciples experience Jesus' ascension and departure.

Throughout his ministry Jesus preached and taught about the presence of the Kingdom of God,

and the kingdom was present when he was.

He called the people to repentance and promised them forgiveness; in fact forgave them.

Jesus does not explicitly tell the disciples to go out and tell his story or proclaim his messiahship.

He doesn't send them out to convert the world to belief in him alone,

or promise resurrection.

The direction he gives as he prepares them for his ascension is to take abroad the good news of God's mercy

proclaiming repentance and forgiveness of sins in Jesus' name.

This is new! This is not what Jesus did in his ministry, but now what his disciples do.

But the disciples are still stuck.

They asked Jesus, "Is this the time when you will restore the kingdom of Israel?"

But Jesus points them to a different future. He is saying to them your vision is too small. Get ready because the Spirit is coming.

Then you will understand the breadth of your mission. It won't just be me, but it will also include you.

Your in “between time,” the time between my ascension and my return is not idle time.

You will have work to do.

The “in between time” continues even today. There is much work to do.

We, like the disciples, have a purpose, a mission that seems really simple,

take the good news!

And we work at that, and we try to figure out what that means for our mission.

We have experienced a great deal of change recently.

Obviously we will have to begin that discernment process all over again.

But, we know what the mission is.

Take the good news to the people!

To what extent are we to take this story of a commissioning 2,000 years ago and apply it to our own mission as disciples of Christ?

To what exactly have we been witnesses?

Upon what do we stand when we undertake to proclaim a gospel of God’s forgiveness and mercy?

How do we acknowledge and share the blessing we have received from God?

What do we have to proclaim?

And on what basis is it particular, concrete and embodied in our lives?

This ascension experience was real for the disciples and it changed them.

So maybe this story can offer images and ideas to help us with the questions we have about our mission.

We might describe our own experience of Christ in our lives revealed through stories of God's grace in our encounters with others;

Or we might share our witness of someone's sacrificial love or

someone's willingness to forgive an outrageous sin.

Sometimes we only have the inkling of a feeling, or an awareness or simply a trust that an incident, something we witness shows us God's presence that we can share.

But, because Jesus ascended we can tell these stories.

There is a link between us and God that follows the trail Jesus traveled on his return to heaven.

We can recognize and identify God's grace in our small, personal affairs, in our encounters with others because it truly is the grace of God bestowed on Jesus,

and Jesus is with us through the presence, work and power of his Holy Spirit.

In the process we can look back at the scriptures for insight into God's revelation of his love, grace and mercy through the ages.

We can look back into our own past and where God has taken us to see that revelation in our own lives.

We can look to the future as the disciples did to see what God lays before us both now and for all eternity.

But, we must always remember to look up as the disciples did at Jesus' ascension—look up to the source of our blessings, our joy, our hope in the promises God has made to us;

life in his Holy Spirit.

“...you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.”

Today Jesus Christ our Lord went up to heaven; let your hearts go up with him.