

“Witnessing While We Wait”

“Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God” (Luke 24:50-53).

Transitions are always challenging. In fact, some of our toughest days are related to transitions and yet the hard truth is...life is full of transitions. This weekend, for instance, we are saying goodbye to the Tiefel and Buechsel families who will be moving in the coming days...*transition*. And this morning we recognized a group of high school graduates who are beginning the next phase of their lives...*transition*. And in just this last week at Emmanuel we've seen members who've welcomed new babies into their homes, we've had people from our church family who have lost or changed jobs and sitting here in the sanctuary right now are brothers and sisters who are still mourning the recent loss of loved ones. Transitions are a huge part of our lives and whether they are bitter or sweet, anticipated or unexpected, times of transition almost always create anxiety and add stress to our lives.

Today, we are focused on the Ascension of Jesus and it is an incredibly important event in the salvation story. You see, the Ascension of Jesus marks the conclusion of His earthly ministry and it also proclaims the reign of Christ in glory as we just heard from our Ephesians reading where we were told that the Father, “seated him at his right hand...far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and...put all things under his feet” (Ephesians 1:20-22). In many ways, the Ascension is the exclamation point on the work of Jesus as our Redeemer and yet, for His disciples, His Ascension marked a time of transition.

Luke records two different accounts of the Ascension and we heard both of them in today's readings from Acts and Luke. In these verses, we learned that after forty days of appearing to and living with and teaching His disciples, the Risen Christ took them to Bethany which was a village near the Mount of Olives just two miles outside of Jerusalem. It was essentially the same location where Jesus had prayed on the night of His arrest and it was a place they had visited many times...but this trip to the Mount of Olives was different. In Luke we are told that when they reached their destination, Jesus lifted up his hands and “blessed them” and “while he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven” (Luke 24:50). In the Acts account, Luke goes into greater detail about this extraordinary event as he writes, “as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight” (Acts 1:9).

Just like that... Jesus was gone! And here's where the transition truly begins. Now we need to remember, Jesus had told them that this was going to happen. In John's Gospel Jesus told His disciples, “I came from the Father and have come into the world, and now I am leaving the world and going (back) to the Father” (John 16:28). And just before they went to the Mount of Olives, Jesus gave His disciples specific instructions to “stay in the city” until they were “clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:49). There was no question that things were about to change. Jesus had plainly said it and He had promised them the power and presence of the Holy Spirit and He even told them that they would do “greater things” than they had seen Jesus do (John 14:12). And yet...here they stood; bewildered by what they had just experienced; unable to take their eyes off the sky; frozen in the anxiety of the transition that had just begun...and this is so often exactly where we find ourselves.

Change is a constant in our lives and the transitions we experience often hit us like a wave and even when we think we are well-prepared and ready to weather the storm, we often find ourselves paralyzed by the uncertainty of what the future will hold. And my friends, as common as this experience may be, we need to recognize that it is nothing less than unbelief. It is doubt in the God who “so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son” (John 3:16). And it is a lack of trust in God's Word to us that that He has plans to prosper us and not to harm us; plans to give us hope and a future. And it is skepticism in the promise from Romans that our Father “who did not spare His own Son but gave Him for us all” will also graciously give us all of the things we need – in this life and the next (Romans 8:32). And just like the

disciples standing on the Mount of Olives, we have also misunderstood Jesus and we have also questioned God and we have also lost ourselves in the clouds rather than trusting in His clear promises.

So how does God respond? What does God do when we misunderstand Christ? How does God handle our rejection of His promises? How does God deal with our sinful doubts? To our anxiety about life's transitions and to our lack of faith and to our damning disbelief...God continues to speak with words of life! And that's exactly what we see in Ascension. Luke writes, "And while they were gazing into heaven...behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.'"

Don't miss this! The angels in white appear to these doubting disciples, *not up in the clouds* as many artists often depict, but instead they are standing right beside them and they carry with them the promise that Jesus will return. *The angels speak words of life!* They renew the promise of Jesus that He had gone to prepare a place for them (John 14:2-3). And they affirm the words of God that, "when Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory" (Colossian 3:4). And they announce the truth that "Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him" (Hebrews 9:28).

Like the disciples, we are all in the midst of a transition. We are all waiting for Him to return and the question in our time of transition is what should we do while we wait? The answer to this question is *also* found in today's readings. You see after the angels spoke to the disciples, Luke shows us what the Ascension of Jesus meant to them. We are told that they "returned to Jerusalem with great joy and were continually in the temple blessing God" (Luke 24:53). *What does waiting look like?* Well, they didn't mourn! And they were not overcome with anxiety! No! Instead they rejoiced and they praised God and they waited to witness!

In every account of the Ascension, Jesus tells His disciples that they will be witnesses. In the book of Matthew, Jesus said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19). In Mark Jesus said, "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to all creation" (Mark 16:15). In today's reading from Luke Jesus says: "repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed to all nations" and in Acts 1:8, "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth."

Waiting does not mean fear. Waiting does mean anxiety. Waiting does not mean standing around, looking up into the sky. Waiting means engaging the people around us. Waiting means loving them. Waiting means listening to them. Waiting means helping them through life's transitions and letting the change that Christ has made in our lives make a difference in the lives of others. In our Baptism, we have been given the power of the Holy Spirit and the purpose of that power is that we may believe the promise of Christ's return and that we may witness while we wait. Amen.

Lord, in Your suffering and death, You removed our sin. In Your resurrection, You revealed our future. In Your Ascension, You took Your place in glory and by Your Holy Spirit, You have given us power to be Your witnesses to the ends of the earth. Cure us of our fear. Save us from the anxieties of this transitory life and use us in this world so that everyone, everywhere will be saved. Amen.

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