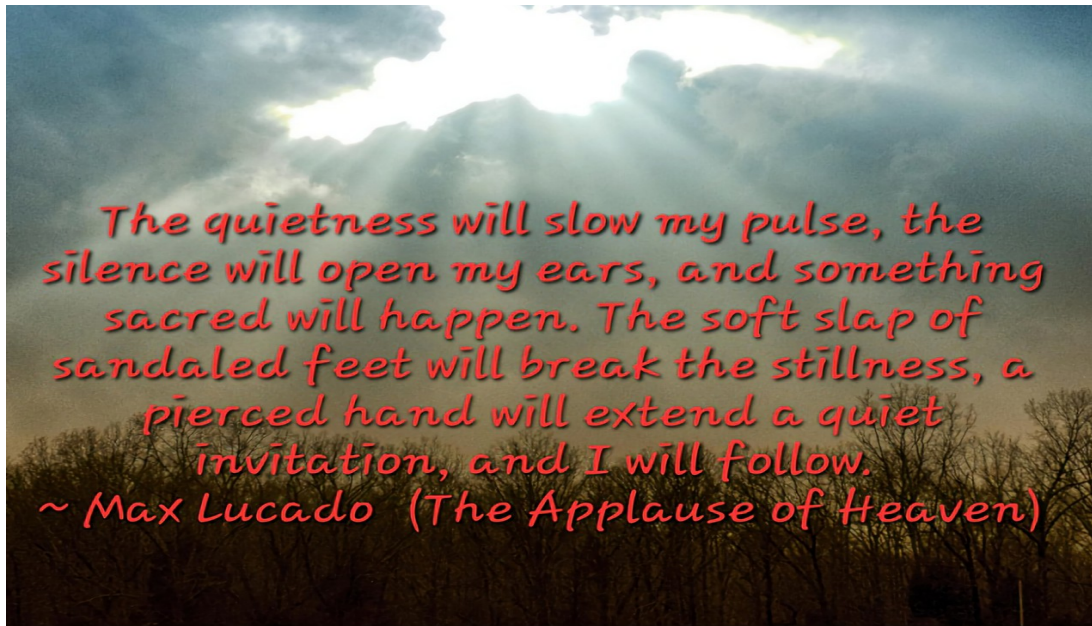


Reflection for Ascension of The Lord Sunday

Acts 1:1-11; Psalm 47; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53

Sunday, May 21st, 2023



Six Sundays ago we listened to the account of Jesus' resurrection and, in the intervening weeks between then and today during this Easter season, we heard stories of Jesus appearing to his disciples: how Mary Magdalene found his tomb empty that Sunday morning after the Passover, and then seeing him in the garden.

Later, in the afternoon, there were followers who saw him on the road to Emmaus, yet they weren't aware of his identity. After they arrived at their destination, with Jesus joining them for supper, they finally recognized him when he broke bread.

When Jesus appeared to the disciples a second time in the Upper Room where they had been hiding for "fear of the Jews," Thomas, who had doubted his peers' account of Jesus appearing before them a week before, touched Jesus' wounds and declared him, "My Lord and my God."

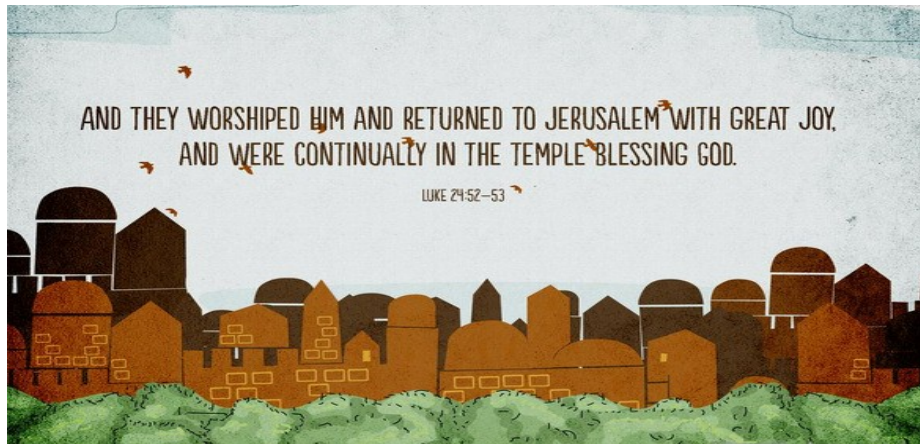
Even though the disciples thought he was dead, Jesus was alive and with them all the time. They could see him, and hear him, and touch him. But today marks an end to Jesus being with his followers in this way.

On the day of his ascension, Jesus took his inner circle out to Bethany, just outside the city walls, where he had raised Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary, from the dead.

According to Luke, Jesus lifted up his hands and blessed his disciples. Then he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.

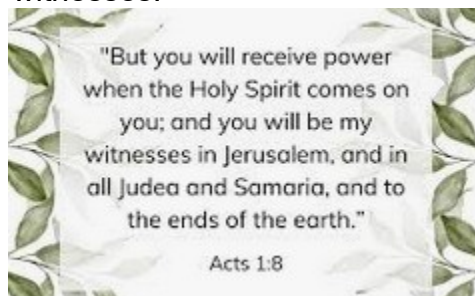
This past Thursday, the fortieth day after Easter Sunday, we celebrated the Feast of the Ascension. To Christians, the ascension signifies that Christ completed his work on Earth and allowed him to prepare a place for his followers in heaven.

After Jesus' ascension, the disciples worshipped him and with great joy they returned to Jerusalem where they were continually in the temple blessing God.



It is important to note that the disciples "worshipped" Jesus. Being of the Jewish faith, they had grown up observing the Torah, following the Ten Commandments. In Exodus and Genesis it is written: "I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods before me." (Exodus 20:2-3; Deuteronomy 5:6-7) They knew that only God deserved their worship, their praise, their adoration. So when Luke says, "they worshipped Jesus" he's really saying, "they finally knew Jesus was God."

And thus ends the Gospel of Luke. We do find out in our reading today from Luke's second volume, the Book of Acts, that the disciples are given a mission (Acts 1:6-11) after they receive the Holy Spirit. They are to be witnesses.



Rev. Mary Hinkle Shore, in her homily *Up and Out*, labels Jesus as an "advance worker" for his disciples, to give them a head start on "all that is left to do...Jesus directs the disciples forward (*Up and out* by Mary Hinkle Shore, May 1, 2007, christiancentury.org) "to continue his work, to live out the faith that he had brought to them. By their witness, the word would begin to spread in and around Jerusalem, and then finally to reach the ends of the earth." (*What a Difference* by Judith Carrick, May 2003, episcopalchurch.org)

The disciples, who had been followers, became apostles.

Luke is the only Gospel writer to record the Ascension. "Our readings for today are at the seam where his two texts overlap to recount the last moments of Jesus' earthly ministry and the [beginnings] of the Christian Church. Through these readings we encounter a dynamic that is important not simply to understanding that point in history, but is vital to our own journey as followers of Jesus." (*Now Is the Turning* by Frank S. Logue, 2010, episcopalchurch.org)

Marcus Borg notes that "...the ascension of Jesus is a central element in the Christian tradition. It is included in the two classic Christian creeds. Both the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed affirm that Jesus ascended into heaven." (*The Ascension of Jesus*, beliefnet.com newsletter)

Today's Gospel symbolically tells us that Jesus is now with God "seated at His right hand."

But what happened to the disciples? They had had the experience of following Jesus, watching him work and hearing him teach. They had witnessed his arrest, trial, and death, and, after the resurrection, they met, ate, and were instructed by Jesus for forty days. What were their next steps?

A beautiful old story tells of how Jesus, after his Ascension into Heaven, was surrounded by the angels who began to inquire about his work on earth. Jesus told them about His birth, life, preaching, death and Resurrection, and how he had accomplished the salvation of the world. The Archangel Gabriel asked, "Well, now that you are back in Heaven, who will continue your work on earth?" Jesus said, "While I was on earth, I gathered a group of people around me who believed in me and loved me. They will continue to spread the Gospel and carry on the work of the Church." Gabriel was perplexed. "You mean Peter, who denied you thrice and all the rest who ran away when you were crucified? You mean to tell us that you left them to carry on your work? And what will you do if this plan doesn't work?" Jesus said, "I have no other plan — it must work." Truly, Jesus has no other plan than to depend on the efforts of his followers! (Stories for Sermons, kayala.com)

And so the original eleven - Simon, who [was] called Peter, and Andrew his brother; James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; [and] Simon the Cananaean (Matthew 10:2-4) - along with Matthias who replaced Judas Iscariot, went out and spent the remainder of their lives proclaiming and witnessing God's word. Most suffered persecution and horrible deaths; many were martyred.

Jesus instructs us to finish his work, as guided by our church's Mission Statement: "*We are a congregation committed to the establishment of a place and presence in which to worship God, proclaim his kingdom, and make known the love of God in Christ Jesus through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.*"

"The Ascension of the Lord is not the marking of a departure but the celebration of a presence." (Jay Cormier, DMin) Jesus already reigns in heaven but will also one day reign on earth. We pray for that every week: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." We pray every week for Jesus to come again and bring to our world the peace and good will promised by the angels at his birth.

We tell God in our Confession and Absolution that we will walk in His ways. When we do, and when our earthly life is finished, author Max Lucado writes, "...we're going to walk down the long corridor through the pearly gates onto the streets of gold. We might see Paul over here and Peter over there and maybe Moses and Elijah...But finally...we're going to round the bend into the throne room of God, and there on the throne will be God the Father. And by His right side Jesus the Christ. Then, we'll hear the applause of heaven." (*The Applause of Heaven*, 1990)

Amen.

Addendum: The Twelve Apostles

Matthew, in Chapter 10, names the disciples:

"The names of the [original] twelve apostles are these: first, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him." (v2-4)

We know that Judas Iscariot hanged himself. But what do we know about the other eleven? And who became the twelfth apostle replacing Judas? Acts 1 verses 21-26 name him Matthias, one of the original disciples who followed Jesus.

The disciples formed the backbone of the early Christian church. They were not extraordinary men; at least four were fishermen, but they were true believers in Jesus and committed to spreading the good news of the Gospel even though Christianity was declared illegal until the 4th century when Emperor Constantine himself became a convert.

The New Testament only shares the fate of **Judas Iscariot** and **James, son of Zebedee**, who was the first apostle to be martyred. He was executed by sword in 44 AD by Herod Agrippa, grandson of Herod the Great (Acts 12:1-2).

There are numerous stories and legends relating the missions and deaths of the remaining apostles, but most of these are only suppositions and lack verification. The fates of the apostles vary according to my research.

Peter founded the first church at Antioch, returned to Rome to spread the message of the Gospel before being executed in Rome by Emperor Nero around 66 AD; at his request he was crucified head-down because he said he was unworthy of dying the same way as Jesus.

Peter's brother, **Andrew**, went to the "land of the man-eaters" - the old Soviet Union - and preached in Asia-Minor, Turkey and Greece. It is believed that he was crucified.

Philip was executed for spreading Christianity in North Africa and Asia Minor.

Bartholomew the missionary travelled to India, Armenia, Ethiopia and Southern Arabia

Tradition has **Thomas** preaching as far as India and founding the Marthoma Christian Church before being killed.

Matthew, the tax collector and Gospel writer, ministered in Persia and Ethiopia. He is honoured as a martyr but his date and manner of death vary.

James, the son of Alphaeus, also known as James the Less, founded the church in Jerusalem, became its first bishop, and is the traditional author of the Book of James in the New Testament.

Thaddeus, also known as **Jude**, preached the Gospel and church tradition claims he founded a church and after his execution in Persia, his body was returned to Rome where his remains rest in St. Peter's Basilica.

Simon the Zealot refused to sacrifice to the sun god in Persia and was executed.

The apostle who replaced Judas, **Matthias**, was believed to travel with Andrew to Syria and was stoned to death.

These apostles suffered greatly and were martyred for their faith and commitment.

Of all the original twelve disciples only **John** is believed to have died of old age. He led the church in Ephesus - a city in Ancient Greece - before being exiled to the island of Patmos and writing the fourth Gospel.

Paul, who was not an original apostle, is credited with establishing new Christian communities throughout the Roman Empire. He founded more than a dozen churches and he's traditionally considered to be the author of thirteen books of the Bible, books that are letters or epistles which he wrote to the churches and people he encountered on his journeys. According to early church fathers, Paul was martyred after being beheaded by Emperor Nero during the Roman years of persecution.

Sources include but not limited to: learnreligions.com; christianity.com; overbible.com; britannica.com; worldhistory.org; pbs.org; wikipedia; gotquestions.org

Map - Traditional Locations Where the Apostles Preached and Died

Key: + - the traditional place(s) of death of the Apostles and John the Baptist
Most of the locations where the Apostles preached and died come from various ancient traditions.
Paul's travels are recorded in Acts

