

ABANDONED TO BE BLESSED

The Ascension

5-1-05
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Acts 1:1-14

BEFORE SCRIPTURE READING

Before we read our Scripture this morning, it will be helpful to remember the context. After Jesus' resurrection on Easter, He was "with" his followers in a resurrected, physical body for 40 days before He ascended into heaven. I put "with" in quotes, because I count twelve recorded post-resurrection appearances to His followers—many of them lasting only a few minutes. So, twelve visits sprinkled through 40 days is not much, and they never knew when Jesus might appear again and then vanish.

Luke is the writer who gives the details of Jesus' ascension into heaven. He ends his gospel with a brief reference to it. Then, when he opens his history of the beginnings of the church, Acts, he adds more detail to Jesus' ascension. Thursday of this week is the day in our church calendar that marks the ascension. I wanted to preach on it today, since there are truths here that I find so helpful to us—especially in the confusing times where we feel God is absent.

Scripture Reading: Acts 1:1-14

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever felt forsaken by God? Have there been times when you've desperately wanted to know the assuring, comforting presence of Jesus and you have been unable to feel His presence? Have you ever felt at a loss spiritually, confused, longing for guidance that hasn't come? If you've been a Christian very long, I expect you've answered yes to some of those questions. The Ascension gives us a chance to honestly explore an area we often would rather ignore.

I felt abandoned by God not too many months after I'd arrived at my first church out of seminary. I was so certain that this was God's call. The church was in pretty bad shape, desperately needing renewal. But, I came with great hopes, excited, certain that renewal would come if I was faithful. Of course I was full of ideas and plans from seminary. I tried this and I tried that, and met with utter frustration. Nothing seemed to connect. They were wonderful people, but spiritually dead. After I'd been there awhile, one of the elders in a session meeting asked if we couldn't have a week-long revival service like many other churches in our area did. Everyone seemed to think that was a fine idea, and I was hopeful—maybe this was the key. I think we called it "A Spiritual Renewal Week," which seemed more Presbyterian than "Revival." We had a wonderful pastor come to lead it. The turn-out was decent, but certainly not inspiring. He gave solid, motivating sermons. The last service was the only time he asked for any response from the congregation. The invitation he gave was *very* general— an invitation for anyone who wanted more from God to come and stand at the front so he could pray for us. Polly and I were sitting right up front to encourage him, so we had no idea what was going on behind us. But, we responded to the invitation. At the end of the prayer, we turned around and there was one other person, an elderly lady, that had joined us. Everyone else was sitting in their pews

looking at us like, “I wonder what’s wrong with the pastor and his wife?”

Of course this visiting pastor was discouraged. Before he left, he sat down with Polly and me and said, “Ken and Polly, get out of this place. It will kill you. You have too much to offer to waste it here.” This was a man I looked up to as an expert in knowing how to grow and revitalize churches. While I was discouraged before he came, now I felt abandoned by God. I’d come in good faith, certain it was God’s will. Why wasn’t anything working? Had I missed God’s call? I felt empty, forsaken, and confused. Yet, out of that dark, lonely time God began doing some deep work in my heart, preparing me over the next few months for what He would do in reviving that church. And in less than a year, God miraculously brought renewal to that church in a way only He could possibly do it.

There’s a lot of things in life we’d rather skip to get on with what we consider to be “the good stuff.” And, there are dark, confusing, empty places in our lives we want to rush past to get on with the pursuit of happiness. Without a doubt, we live in a culture obsessed with denying or covering-over anything that might make us feel bad. I’ve read about churches that have gone so far as to not display a cross because it doesn’t fit with the positive image they want to portray. The cross is seen as a “downer.”

Certainly there *is* much in the Bible about God satisfying our deepest longings, as well as bringing joy and peace to our hearts. God’s presence is wonderful, as David affirms in the 16th Psalm,

*in thy presence is fullness of joy;
at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore. (11)*

Jesus gives us that compelling image of the living water He offers, satisfying our deepest thirst (Jn. 7:34 & 4:14). We know of the inner void Jesus fills with His life in us, giving purpose and meaning to our lives. These of course are the truths we like to hear.

But also, even in following Christ perfectly, we enter times of seeming absence of His presence, emptiness, and confusion. In my mind, I have a collage of images of people coming to me as their pastor asking, “What is wrong, what has happened? I feel abandoned by God. I really want God, I desperately need Him— I can’t handle what I’m facing without Him. Where is He? What has happened?” The Ascension reminds us that times of absence can also serve God’s purposes in wonderfully creative ways. It helps us not panic when we enter such a period and guides us in discovering the gift times of emptiness can bring.

Let’s consider how the disciples handle this. Luke in his gospel adds one interesting detail. After giving promises about the Holy Spirit’s coming to empower them, Jesus led them out to the hill called the Mt. of Olives, just across the Kidron valley from Jerusalem, and,

*he lifted up his hands and blessed them.
While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven.*

“While he was blessing them, he left them....” Maybe you’ve been there too— right after a wonderful blessing, maybe a great retreat or another spiritually renewing time, you lost sight of Jesus. Suddenly the disciples are thrust into a whole new era. Standing there in stunned awe, wonder, and confusion, still trying to get a glimpse of Jesus, they are surprised by two angels

who appear beside them, reminding them they have a commission, and leaving them with another promise.

"Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven." (Acts 1:11)

The Ascension is bracketed by two wonderful promises. Just before leaving them, Jesus promises they will be baptized by the Holy Spirit. Then immediately after He leaves, the promise of Jesus' return is given. The first promise is fulfilled ten days later, on the Day of Pentecost. The second is one for which we still wait. But it is this ten day period of absence and waiting that we want to explore this morning.

WAITING

When our granddaughter, Hannah, was three-years-old, she was having a hard time waiting for Christmas. It was the first year she had memories of the glory of Christmas, so as the hype began in earnest in early November, she kept asking her mom when Christmas would get here. The numbers of days Denise would tell her didn't seem to be something Hannah could grasp. Finally, Denise said, "First we have Thanksgiving Day— you remember that don't you?— and then we'll get to Christmas." Hannah responded, "Can't we just skip Thanksgiving?"

Waiting is hard. We all want to skip the waiting and get on with things as we want them. Perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of waiting is that we are not in control. Someone else is clearly in charge, and we have to wait upon their pleasure. There is helplessness in waiting. Generally, there's not much we can do to make the traffic move faster, the line move faster, or the Dr. get to us sooner.

But spiritually, waiting can be highly creative for us. As we await the fulfillment of God's promises, or the return of His presence, our very lack of being in control is cause for a deeper surrender of our wills to His will and time. Waiting is an important part of God's saving work the Bible tells us. Think of Abraham, waiting years and years for the promise to be fulfilled. Joseph had many, many years of waiting for fulfillment of his dreams. The children of Israel were slaves in Egypt and waited 400 years for deliverance. Moses had to wait until he was 80-years-old to lead Israel out of captivity. Then they all waited another 40 years in the desert, wandering, until it was God's time to enter the promised land. Jesus waited 30 years before beginning His public ministry. Then it all begins with 40 days of temptation in the wilderness—*more* preparation.

But waiting, along with God's seeming absence, is a tool the Spirit can use within us to prepare our hearts. We realize God is not at our beck and call, and in our helplessness we have the opportunity to relinquish everything to God's plan. There are three things these first disciples did that can help us through these times of absence and waiting. They 1) stayed together, 2) they prayed together, and 3) they returned to the upper room.

1st STAYING TOGETHER

One of my first tendencies when things get confusing, or when I feel forsaken by God is to want to withdraw. How about you? When you've tried to trust God and it seems like He hasn't come through for you, it is tempting to go off in a corner and sulk. I know many people withdraw from the church because of some major disappointment with God. And, let me say it clearly, **that is the worst thing to do.** Those are times we need the Body of Christ, the faith and perspective of others, the Word of God proclaimed with authority, and the praises of God sung. While it may feel like the last place we want to be, it is where we are commanded to be. Hebrews 10:25 is written to discouraged Christians who feel like giving up,

*Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing,
but let us encourage one another— ...*

These first disciples didn't scatter or withdraw, but met together. I'm sure they all had their own thoughts and confusion to work through. But they stayed together. We are told there were about 120 of them meeting. They didn't know how long they were to wait for the promise, but they waited together. It is not easy being continuously in community with 120 people. We are told it was a large upper room, but still one room. People's mannerisms, personalities, quirks can easily begin to get to us in being thrust together hour after hour. It sounds like they were all staying right there— though their meetings may have been in one of the side rooms adjoining the temple area. Peter, as we'd expect from his personality, tries to organize something with an election to replace Judas. But it strikes us as more of a human action than anything Spirit-guided. Yet, somehow, through this time together, they emerged a community of faith. The main thing they did together was pray.

2nd PRAYING TOGETHER

They all joined together constantly in prayer... (14).

Prayer is where we need to turn in our confusion about what to do next. These disciples are left with a seemingly impossible task, being witnesses to the ends of the earth. I'm sure they were all feeling, "But how?" They were all at a loss without Jesus. And, they were totally unfit for the task. They'd all folded under pressure when Jesus was arrested. And, right up until the time of Jesus' ascension they still haven't gotten what it's really about. Their last question to Jesus reveals where they're at, "*Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?*" (Acts 1:6). Over three years of teaching and they are still looking for a physical kingdom with Jesus overthrowing Rome and I imagine also thinking they'd occupy key positions. It shows how far they still need to go.

But, waiting together in prayer brings about repentance, clears the clutter, purges our motives of self, making possible a new thing. All of them were aware of their inadequacies at this point and their total dependence upon Jesus. And, as everything else is swept away, they become vessels to receive the incredible power from on high.

It just happens that the National Day of Prayer this Thursday corresponds this year with Ascension Day. It strikes me as an appropriate juxtaposition. Christians, we hope from all the

churches of our area, will gather in the park next door and join together in prayer for our community and nation. We will be seeking God for a fresh out-pouring of His Spirit upon all of us so we can indeed be obedient instruments of bringing forth His purposes in our community and nation. The joining together across denominational lines is important and pleasing to our Lord. Plan to come together for this.

3rd RETURNING TO THE UPPER ROOM

While it isn't certain, it would seem that this is the same upper room where Jesus spent His last night with His disciples. In going there after Jesus left them, they are going back to what they know and to a major anchoring event in their lives. It was there, Jesus instituted the Last Supper. "This is my body broken for you" in the bread they ate. And, "This is my blood poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins" in wine they shared from one cup. Then, the command, "Do this in remembrance of me." It was also the place of His washing the disciples' feet, followed by,

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

(John 13:34-35)

Here is a recentering of their lives in the basics. They didn't know what the promises for their future really meant, but they did know something of central importance took place here.

It is always good for us to return to what we do know when faced with what we don't understand, when we feel lost, when we feel an absence of that for which we long for. We need those faith-anchors to hold us steady.

CONCLUSION

This morning, there may be some here who are in the place of the disciples at the ascension—feeling empty, confused, at a loss to know what to make of things. Some may even feel forsaken by God. Remembering this event, and those confusing ten days before Pentecost can hold us steady in times like that. Even more important, approach it as these disciples did. Don't be afraid to explore the empty place and use it to prepare you for a fresh outpouring of God's Spirit.

But, follow their pattern in holding onto the promises. Don't go-it-alone. Keep yourself attached to the community of faith. Stay with other believers. Pray with them. Remember the anchoring events of your spiritual journey— especially the reality of salvation proclaimed in the Lord's Supper.

Don't underestimate the gift of waiting, the opportunity it provides of surrendering and emptying ourselves before God. As we do it well, we are promised a fullness and glory beyond anything we can imagine— in His time and way.

Come to the Lord's table this morning, hungry for more of the fulness of His presence in your heart.