

Seventh Sunday of Easter (Ascension Sunday) – May 24, 2020

Introduction

Last Thursday [May 21] was Ascension Day – Forty days after our Lord's resurrection. While some churches have a worship service on that day, many others delay the remembrance of Jesus' ascension into heaven on the following Sunday Liturgically, it is the Seventh Sunday after Easter. We will follow that practice and focus on the appointed texts for Ascension Day.

I love the story of our Lord's Ascension into heaven because it reflects our uneasiness about the future. And for most of us, this uneasiness has dramatically increased since mid-March when started **'sheltering in place'** and practicing strict **'social distancing'** when we must go out for the necessities of life. Make no mistake about our situation. Our lives have changed dramatically and there does not seem to be much we can do about it. **Has it been worth it? Has the infection curve 'flattened?' Are we safer at home?** I think that the answer is **yes** to all these and similar questions.

But there is also a restlessness deep within us as we reflect on the meaning of our Lord's ascension this week. With so much talk about **'opening up the economy,' 'getting back to work,'** and trying to return to lives that we left behind 10 weeks ago, there is a compelling sense of uneasiness that haunts us. We face the **'What now?'** question in ways we never anticipated until only recently. How do we go to the grocery store? What about going out for coffee or out for dinner? What about gather again in our sanctuaries for worship? How do we/Should we have communion? Dare we sing our liturgy and our beloved hymns? Do we have to wear face masks when we go out?

I wish I had answers. I do know that some people are intentionally defying public health guidance by intentionally not socially distancing, not wearing masks, and insisting that they be allowed to do as they will because they believe that it is their constitutional right to do so. **I believe that this is not living in accordance with what Jesus would have us do as we relate to those around us.** Some of the states that have pushed the boundaries and 'opened up' early are now having spikes in their infection rates [e.g. Texas]. **Is this a statistical fluke, or is it real? Who knows?**

So as the days pass, we live with this uneasiness about the future. We live with the **'What now?'** question. I think that the story of our Lord's ascension gives us a way to re-frame our thoughts. **'What now?'** may not be the most important question. Perhaps we should ask **'Who do we trust?'** before we do anything. Take care and may God be with you.

In Christ ✚,

Pastor Steve

Gospel -- Luke 24:44-53

⁴⁴Then [Jesus] 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.

Scripture Lesson – Acts 1.1-11

The Evangelist Luke writes to Theophilus, his patron, about the story of Jesus and the beginning of the Church: ¹In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning ²until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. ⁴While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. ‘This,’ he said, ‘is what you have heard from me; ⁵for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.’

⁶So when they had come together, they asked him, ‘Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?’ ⁷He replied, ‘It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’ ⁹When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. ¹¹They said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.’

‘What now?’

Let us pray. Almighty God, Eternal Father, you are the Timeless One who bends even history to your saving will. By your command, we were baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus so that we might live in eternity with you. But Lord, we are sinners who live between two worlds; sinners that we are, and saints that you would make us.

Like the first disciples who watched your Son ascend into heaven, we wait and we pray. We wait for your Holy Spirit and we pray that he would guide us to a saving faith in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Brothers and sisters, grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Before going to **Luther Seminary in St. Paul**, I was a mechanical engineer. I did both my undergraduate and graduate work at the **University of Minnesota**. My specialty was thermodynamics, heat transfer, and fluid flow. I also did work in production control and manufacturing processes. We learned how to determine optimal machine loading and overall production schedules.

Engineers are trained to be ‘*problem-solvers*’ . . . Unless you talk to car mechanics who often argue that design engineers are ‘*problem-makers*’ who have no consideration for those who must work on their engines after the fact. And because of this, engineers are sometimes the objects of, shall we say, unkind humor. Let me give you an example.

During the French Revolution, many who were deemed ‘enemies of the state’ were put on trial and eventually executed. The victims of the guillotine included royalty, clergy, nobles, professional people, and some of the revolutionaries themselves.

On this particular day, they brought a bishop, a priest, and an engineer to the guillotine. They asked the bishop if he wanted to be face up or down when he met his fate. The bishop said that he would like to face up so he would be looking towards heaven when he died. They raised the blade of the guillotine and released it. It came speeding down and suddenly stopped just inches from his neck. The executioner said, ‘It’s a miracle . . . God does not want this man to die.’

Then the priest came to the guillotine. He also decided to die face up hoping that he would be as fortunate as the bishop. They raised the blade of the guillotine and released it. It came speeding down and suddenly stopped just inches from his neck. Citing divine intervention, the executioner said, ‘God saved this man.’ So they released the priest as well.

*The engineer was next. He decided to die facing up also. They slowly raised the blade of the guillotine, when suddenly the engineer said, ‘**Hey, I see what the problem is.**’*

Like I said, we engineers are problem solvers. I’ll never forget my first assignment after I started working as an engineer. I was given a simple metal bracket to re-design. The product had changed, and the bracket was no longer doing its job. My first response was, ‘No sweat; it’s a piece of cake. Give me the afternoon on it.’ Three days later, it still wasn’t done . . . And, if the truth be known, I hadn’t really started. For all the courses I’d taken . . . For all the theory I knew . . . I still didn’t know what to do . . . **Some problem-**

solver! Embarrassed, I finally had to talk to my supervisor. I just knew what he was thinking, *‘Don't they teach them anything in school?’* My question to my supervisor was very simple, **‘What now? What do I do?’**

The **‘What now?’** question is important. It is more than an engineering question; **it is a life question – A question that doesn't always have answers that are obvious to us.** Life is further complicated when our Christian faith doesn't seem to provide answers either. So we ask, **‘What now?’**

What if I get an unforeseen diagnosis from the doctor? **What now?**

What will happen when my child leaves home for the first time for college or military service? **What now?**

What if I lose my job? [Something that's very real in in this time of Covid-19.] **What now?**

What if they don't find a vaccine by the end of the year? What if I get sick? **What now?**

What happens when I realize that I am closer to the end of my life than I am to the beginning? **What now?**

The questions are endless . . . The **What now?'s** can be overwhelming.

Today is Ascension Sunday . . . The day we celebrate our Lord's return to heaven. But the ascension story leaves one with an uneasy feeling. The **‘What now?’** question must have been very real to the disciples. After all, they were *problem-solvers*; people who were used to getting things done. They had seen the Resurrected Christ and they were ready to do something. But as they watched Jesus ascend into heaven, they must have been asking, **‘What now? . . . Do we start preaching? . . . Do we go home? . . . Do we go back to our old jobs? . . . What now?’** It is apparent that there are many unanswered questions.

In the three short years the disciples were with Jesus, they had seen and heard much. The power of God was upon him. They fed multitudes, the sick were restored to health, the people were taught with parables, and the Kingdom of God was proclaimed. Beyond all this, the disciples became witnesses to the life-giving power of God on the first Easter. The same Jesus who died on the cross was resurrected as the Christ of God. One can only imagine what they must have thought. All their hopes and dreams would finally be realized. Each disciple would become a fiery evangelist spreading the Gospel of Christ. They would preach with power and people would listen. They would be problem-solvers.

After staying with them forty days, Jesus commanded them to remain in Jerusalem and await the coming of the Holy Spirit. Before he was taken from them, the disciples inquired about the Kingdom. They half-hoped that Jesus would fashion a kingdom after their design. But when Jesus spoke of the Kingdom, it was a Kingdom far different than

they envisioned. Jesus said, '**... YOU SHALL RECEIVE POWER WHEN THE HOLY SPIRIT HAS COME UPON YOU; AND YOU SHALL BE MY WITNESSES IN JERUSALEM AND IN ALL OF JUDEA AND SAMARIA TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH.**' *And when he had spoken these words, Jesus was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight.*

The disciples were transfixed by what they saw. With heaven on their minds, they were ready to do battle for Jesus. But their bubble burst when Jesus disappeared. The task was simply too large. The implications of Jesus' leaving were too much to comprehend; so they just stood there looking up into the empty sky. *Even the Risen Christ had left them. **What now?***

I think that the disciples were paralyzed because they had forgotten the promise of the Holy Spirit made by Jesus. They had forgotten that they were to be his witnesses to Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria . . . even to the ends of the world. Like us, they did not remember all that Jesus had promised. So when this crisis arose, the disciples came to the precipice of faith and said '**What now?**'

St. Luke tells us that it took a vision of angels to get them going . . . Angels who reminded them of Jesus' promise to send the Holy Spirit. So they returned to Jerusalem and waited. There was nothing else to do—**so they waited and prayed.**

So what do we make of the Ascension story? St. Luke tells the story in the book of Acts in such a way to answer the Church's question about the what, where, and how of the Kingdom.

First, there are questions about what the Kingdom of God is. We are told that in the forty days following his resurrection, Jesus instructed his disciples about the true nature of God's Kingdom. However, it appears that they did not understand the nature of God's Kingdom nor the task to which they had been called. Even as Jesus ascends into heaven, the disciples ask whether this is the time when God will restore the Kingdom to Israel.

Once again, Jesus reminds them that the Kingdom of God will not be limited only to Israel. When Jesus speaks these words to us, he reminds us that the Kingdom of God is far bigger than our individual churches. God's Kingdom will begin in Jerusalem and spread in ever widening circles to Judea, Samaria, even to the end of the earth **so that all people** will encounter the Resurrected Lord of life. Like those who follow Jesus, we wait for the leading of God's Holy Spirit – **Something that is so crucial as we to 'get back to normal' with our lives.**

Second, there are questions about where the Kingdom of God is. After Jesus had ascended into heaven, the angels ask the disciples why they were still standing there, looking into heaven. One Bible scholar, whose name I've long since forgotten, suggests that the location of 'heaven' is less important than the direction of heaven. In this text, as in others, 'upward' is the direction of God. 'To go up' means to go 'Godward.' The Godward direction points toward the holy will of God in human affairs. The Ascension

of Christ means that the work of the Kingdom must be the needle of a cosmic compass that always points to God.

The *Godward* direction for us begins where we are and leads us into the world of men and women with whom and for whom Jesus lived and died. The appropriate direction for people to look is not heavenward but toward the earth where the work of the Lord will continue until he comes again. He has not abandoned the world. God will 'restore the Kingdom' but in a way neither the disciples nor we expect — It will come with the daily witness of believers to the saving life and death of Jesus.

And finally, there are questions about how we should wait. The book of Acts tells us that when the disciples returned to Jerusalem, 'They went up to the upper room . . . [and] with one accord, they devoted themselves to prayer.' **When we pray**, we enter the very presence of God. . . . **When we pray**, we open ourselves to him . . . **When we pray**, our Father promises to listen . . . **And when we try to pray and cannot**, God's own Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words [Romans 8.26].

Our spiritual lives are roller-coaster experiences that run from religious fervor to real doubt. Sometimes we are so close to God that we can almost touch the Kingdom. At other times, we just do not know what we believe. Moreover, we live in a world that is unbelieving, uncaring, and uncompromisingly hostile.

Therefore, like the disciples, we wait. We wait without a clear vision of the future. **We wait knowing** the pain and uncertainty of life. **We wait knowing** that death is very much a part of our lives. **And we wait knowing** that we struggle with our faith. But as followers of the Ascended Jesus, we wait with hope. And we wait knowing that we rest securely in God's hand forever.

What now? To be perfectly honest, I do not know. I think that prayer is important while we wait for answers. But the fact that we do not know is not important. **What is important is that God knows.**

'What now?' God's answer might well surprise us. Amen.