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Luke 24:44-53 -- Absence and Presence

We are in the last week of the season of Eastertide - the season between Jesus' resurrection and Pentecost, when we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit that birthed the church. The Sunday before Pentecost Sunday we mark the ascension of the Lord, an event that according to the book of Acts occurred 40 days after the discovery of the empty tomb. This would actually put it last Thursday, but since it is not our tradition to come to services on Thursday, we celebrate it on the Sunday after – today.

So hear now these words from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 24, words that call us to be Christ's presence in the world after Christ is bodily absent from us.

Then 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." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And 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."

Then Jesus led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, Jesus withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the temple blessing God. **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

Ascension of the Lord Sunday doesn't rank up there in the top church holidays for most people. There are no special decorations, no festive foods, nary a trumpet in sight. Ascension of the Lord Sunday can be a bit anticlimactic, and actually downright confusing. After all on Easter Sunday we joyfully proclaim - Christ is Risen! He is Risen Indeed. We sing *Christ the Lord is Risen Today*. The trumpets play. We are Easter people, Christ has triumphed over death. Alleluia. Amen! Christ has risen. He has risen indeed.

So at Easter and onward we have this narrative that Christ has risen and our very human brains interpret that as Christ floating somewhere up above us; our understanding influenced by artists' images through the ages.

And then during the season of Eastertide we hear stories of Jesus appearances to the disciples after his death and resurrection - not just at the empty tomb, but to Cleopas and his companion on the road to Emmaus; to the disciples gathered, fearful, in an upper room; to Thomas who didn't believe the other disciples about Jesus' appearance and who Jesus has touch the wounds in his side and hands; to Peter and the other disciples on the lakeshore, helping them to catch fish, cooking them breakfast and commanding Peter to feed his sheep and tend his lambs. And then Jesus appeared to the disciples on the top of a mountain in Galilee, when Jesus gives them the great commission - to make disciples of all of the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

So if we celebrate that Jesus rose from the dead on Easter Sunday, rejoicing in the promise of the empty tomb that *Christ the Lord is Risen Today*, what are all of these post-resurrection appearances about? Didn't he "ascend into heaven" and isn't he seated at the "right hand of God the Father almighty" as we will say in the Apostles Creed in a few minutes?

Welcome to Ascension Sunday - the missing link so to speak in our journey from Easter to Pentecost. Ascension Sunday marks Jesus' last appearance to the disciples. It marks the transition of the mission of God being fulfilled by Jesus Christ the man to the mission of God being fulfilled by the church - the church being Christ's body here on earth after Jesus the Christ is no longer present. The ascension of the Lord is when we get our marching orders as a collective and the promise that we will be able to fulfill God's mission through the power of the Holy Spirit – a gift we acknowledge next week at Pentecost.

In some ways today's passage is like a graduation speech to the disciples – something I think we can appreciate in this season of graduations. I have heard a lot of graduation speeches in my life – my own, those of friends and family, and as a former professor those of my students. I am guessing that most of you have heard a few as well. Out of these many graduation speeches, there are very few that I actually remember. Very few. But one I do remember was given by Meryl Streep when I was a sophomore at Lafayette College in Easton, PA.

Streep said, "Isn't it amazing . . . that no matter how we try to fix the future, we never really know what it holds for us. I wonder if in 1971 as I graduated from Vassar I could have believed that fourteen years later I would find myself sitting on a rock in Africa in hippo infested waters, where the nearest town was five hours away. I'm sopping wet, with my hair freshly shampooed by Robert Redford - seven times in a row. And as he's about to pour a bucket of water over my head for an eighth time, all I'm thinking about is what the heck am I going to say to Lafayette seniors in three weeks."¹

Streep had just completed filming the movie *Out of Africa* a few days before giving this speech. As I was thinking about this sermon and all that has happened in the last week – last few weeks – last two years, Streep's words from so many years ago echoed in my head. No matter how we try to fix the future, we never really know what it holds for us.

For those disciples who gathered around Jesus – they had no idea what the future held for them. They had just been through the most agonizing of times – watching their beloved friend and master, brutally crucified on a cross. They had just been through the most confusing of times- the discovery of an empty tomb and Jesus appearing to them as they broke bread together.

But like a good graduation speech – or commencement speech – Jesus understands that his impending ascension is not really marking an ending, but a beginning. And that beginnings come with not only with excitement, but also anxiety and doubt. And maybe some downright fear of the unknown that lies ahead.

So these were no lofty words from Jesus given to impress the media, big donors, or even the crowds. Here Jesus is reminding the disciples of all the words that he spoke to them and that

¹ The text of Streep's speech can be read at: <https://www.mcall.com/news/mc-xpm-1985-06-03-2468813-story.html>

he is the fulfillment of all that has been written in the Hebrew scriptures. Luke tells us that Jesus opened the minds of the disciples to understand the scriptures, and reminded them that scriptures say that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day. And that it is in the name of the Messiah that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed to all nations. Jesus tells the disciples that his resurrection is not the end of the story – it is the beginning of the disciples journey to carry on the good news of salvation to all people. It is truly a commencement speech.

Jesus tells the disciples that they will receive what God has promised, that they will be clothed with power from on high. And after Jesus makes this promise to them, he leads the disciples out of the house where they had gathered and they walk a bit to Bethany and then lifting up his hands, Jesus blessed them. While Jesus was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.

Greg Moore and Cameron Merrill remind us in their recent article in *Ministry Matters*, that “...would be the end of the story... if Luke’s Gospel ended there. If the Ascension is the last story of the life of Jesus, it should be told from someone wearing sackcloth and ashes. Of course [we] know that Luke’s Gospel does not end there. Rather, it flows into the Acts of the Apostles where resurrection is performed by the church in the space that has been created by the Ascension.”²

I like the imagery that Moore and Merrill depict – the ascension of Christ creates space. We see this first in the response of the disciples– it is not the same response they had at Jesus’ death nor the response they had when they heard about the empty tomb. No – we hear that the disciples worshiped Jesus and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they spent their time continually in the temple blessing God, waiting for the promise – that they would be clothed with the power from on high. The ascension created a space for worship.

The ascension also created a space for ministry transformation. The disciples were waiting for the fulfillment of God’s mission to be continued, continued from a ministry focused on the life and body of one solitary man to a ministry focused on the church - the life and body of Christ as a collective. Or as Moore and Merrill say it, “The Ascension of Christ does not mark God’s absence but God’s ubiquity.” That God is everywhere- in all places and times.

They go on to posit that this is not primarily a spiritual claim, but rather a political claim, saying, “The church’s claim that Christ is ubiquitous is over and against Caesar’s claim of ubiquitous control. From this point on, God is filling the whole world with people and practices that bring the dead back to life. That’s why the disciples rejoice at the end of Luke 24. Look at all the space God has created for the kingdom to take shape!”

Look at all the space God has created for the kingdom to take shape. And boy do we ever need that space this week. We need that space to claim – to reclaim – the values Christ taught us. The values of compassion and loving neighbor, of feeding and healing, and yes, the value of standing up to power – to money, to influence, to the empire, to the weapons that hold people down and take their very breath – the gift of their spirit - away.

² Moore, Greg and Merrill, Cameron. Ascension: Claiming Holy Ground. In: *Ministry Matters*. May 4th, 2016. <https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/6888/ascension-claiming-holy-ground>

Moore and Merrill conclude saying, “The Ascension is the feast where the church claims that God is still in the business of taking up space in the world through the body of Christ. From this point on, all ground is holy, all flesh is sacred, all places ripe with the potential of resurrection....Because let’s face it, if the story ended with only with Christ’s absence, there would be no hope for the deadly boundaries being drawn against the witness of the church. Instead, we have politicians calling for walls to separate the desirable from the undesirable. We have campaign rallies filled with hate speech, state legislatures saying certain lines can’t be crossed unless you have a birth certificate proving you belong, and a growing list of dead children and refugees witnessing that some lives matter less than others and therefore don’t deserve space in our world.”³

Moore and Merrill wrote their article earlier in the month of May, before Buffalo and Laguna Woods and Uvalde would make the poignancy of absence even more compelling. The presence of those precious lives lost this week and last week and the week before and years before; those memorialized by the hallowed ground where they died - Columbine, Sandy Hook, Parkland; the absence of those who died needless and senseless deaths because we as a people failed to stand up to the power brokers, to the money, to the politicians, to those who prioritized access to military-style deadly weapons above the lives of children.

There is a certain irony and poignancy that we are speaking of presence and absence and speaking of hallowed ground on this Memorial Day weekend, when we celebrate those who have sacrificed their lives so that we might have the freedom to cry out for change.

In his address at Gettysburg, Abraham Lincoln recognized the need to remember, yes - and then to act, saying “But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate -- we cannot consecrate -- we cannot hallow -- this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion -- that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain...”⁴

Friends, we celebrate the ascension of the Lord Sunday not because it is the ending of Jesus’ time on earth, but because it is the beginning – the beginning of the call of the disciples throughout history to be Christ’s body on earth. The beginning of our call to be witnesses; to testify to the love and grace that has changed our lives and to extend that love and grace to others. It is the beginning of our call to be a servant people; to be present in the lives of those in need; it is the beginning of our call to be healers in the broken places of the world, to be repairers of the breach; it is the beginning of our call to speak truth to power, truth that proclaims all are created in the image of God and all have a seat at the table; truth that is often uncomfortable and sometimes unpopular and possibly even dangerous to share. But share it we must. For Christ’s physical absence on earth is our call to be Christ’s presence on earth. May it be so.

³ ibid

⁴ <https://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/gettysburg.htm>