



"I've Got Good News and Bad News"

Acts 1:6-14

The Seventh Sunday Of Easter

May 4, 2008

There is good news and there is bad news in today's lesson.

The bad news is that Jesus is no longer among us bodily on earth. He has ascended to heaven as we just said in the creed, where he "sits at the right hand of God, the Father Almighty, from whence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead"; which is all well and good in the great by and by, but for now he is gone from our sight.

The good news is that God is still with us in Spirit and in truth, even as we look to next Sunday when we celebrate Pentecost, the gift of the Holy Spirit to the early church, the continuation of God's presence, comfort and power among us.

But the story of the ascension is an odd story, because unlike miracles that happen when people are healed, the lame walk, the dead are raised—all of which seem to have practical implications for our own lives—here is a miracle that is all about God and doesn't really heal anyone, or call anyone back to life, or restore any losses. It's just a beautiful, wonderful, inspiring thing that's all about God, and not something promised to us.

It starts out with an inquiry from the disciples: "You had us worried at Golgotha, but now that you're back when does all the heavy artillery roll in so we can take over?" In short, they still didn't get it.

After all they have experienced, all the time traveling with Jesus, hearing his message, his constant denials that his kingdom was not of this world, his death at the hand of the Roman authorities—all of that notwithstanding, the disciples are still wondering which cabinet post Jesus is going to appoint them to.

What's a Savior to do? They are so dumb. You expect Jesus to throw up his hands and say, "What is it going to take for you guys to wake up and smell the coffee? It's over. I'm not that kind of Messiah! You are not going to be in charge. We're not going to be sitting on the throne."

Awful, terrible things happen when nations decide that they are God's instruments for the implementation of divine will and justice on earth.

Instead of receiving the oath of office, the disciples received a different charge. "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." And as Jesus said this he was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight.

As the disciples stand in amazement of this display of miraculous power, wondering if they can believe what they have just seen, two angels say to them: "Why are you standing here with your feet stuck in the ground looking to heaven? You've got two choices. You can either stand here and look foolish, or you can go back to Jerusalem and get ready to receive the Spirit and then do what he told you to do, be witnesses to the ends of the earth."

It's odd that this fabulous story of Jesus' ascending into heaven doesn't really want us staring at what seems so wonderful, watching the clouds, trying to catch a glimpse of Jesus' feet. It wants to send us back to the world where in the movement and life of everyday experience we will know him present among us.

I think the disciples must have been puzzled, felt some loneliness and lack of clarity about what should happen next, once Jesus faded from sight.

My father told me the story years after it happened. It was about the day my mother and father took me, their first-born, to college. Packing to go to college then was nothing like I see now, especially for boys. I had a suitcase with my clothes in it, and a cardboard box where my mother had put some towels and sheets. In that box was a record player. We got to my dorm; all three of us carried my meager belongings to my assigned room, and met my roommate. My mother unpacked my suitcase and put my clothes in the drawers and closet, unpacked the sheets and towels, and helped me put them on the bed. She had sewed my name into my clothes, marked my towels and sheets with my initials. Then we went and got a bite to eat.

It became clear that they had to leave and say good-bye. My father said to be careful and that I was now going to be on my own. They got in the car, we waved, and they began to return home. My father told me they drove for about thirty minutes when my mother asked him to stop the car and she then got out of the car and began to cry-- for almost forty-five minutes. I was on my own, her first-born, and she said to my father she didn't know what she was going to do without me in the house.

I don't suppose Jesus wept when he left the disciples behind, all of them standing there with their mouths wide open. But I suppose he must have thought, "Well, it's all in their hands now." They who were still asking

stupid questions...Jesus must wondered whether he should leave them or not, so ill-equipped they seemed to be, so poorly informed about the dynamite upon which they were sitting, and how important it was that they get out and start witnessing to what they had seen and experienced in him.

The Ascension story shines the light away from Jesus and upon us. It forces us to take seriously the question, "Now that we know how great God's resurrection power is, what are we going to do with that power?" How will we share it with others, and how will we be changed by its demands and claims on our life?

"You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." And how will we do that?

Today I think that means living as faithfully as we can, raising our children in the faith, keeping our own faith strong and nurtured. It is to embrace the love of God expressed so powerfully in the love of Jesus Christ who gave his life that we might have it abundantly.

It is to live so that God is able to use us as agents of peace and reconciliation in a world that is warring and broken.

It is to live with hope in a time of despair,

To set our minds and hearts on heavenly things and lay up treasure in heaven, while the values of accumulation and wealth and greed and selfishness are embraced by others.

It is to live a life of simplicity, while others acquire,

To embrace prayer while others around us embrace expediency.

It is to trust that God is working in ways seen and unseen to bring about purposes that we can either assist or impede, depending on the life we live and the faith we put to work in the world.

St. Theresa of Avila, the 16<sup>th</sup> century mystic, once wrote of the work and calling that is ours in this life as followers of Christ.

"Christ has no body on earth but yours, no hands but yours; yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion looks out on the world, yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good, and yours are the hands with which he is to bless us now."

"Why are you standing looking to heaven?" the angels asked the disciples. And Jesus said, "You are my witnesses...." To the ends of the earth. My witnesses...in Grove Park, on Cherokee, Cashua, Irby, Evans, Palmetto, Marion, Lake City, Lamar, Columbia, Washington, and Darfur.

"You are my witnesses," he said, "so why are you standing there looking to heaven?"

Amen.