

“Standing Around or Moving On?”

Acts 1:10-11; Luke 24:51-53

May 17, 2015

Ascension Day (Observed)

Reaction to our Lord’s ascension is always interesting. In our present day, it is mostly ignored, even though, from the start, it was considered to be one of the four major festivals of the church year, along with Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost. It is ignored by many churches who don’t have worship services on that day. And, even where congregations do have special worship services to celebrate the ascension, it is ignored by many Christians who are busy with outdoor fun, sports, and other activities at this time of year. However, imagine how you would have reacted to the ascension if you had been there personally when Jesus ascended into heaven.

We are fortunate to have two accounts of the ascension in Scripture. Both are written by the same man: Luke. The first account is in the Book of Acts. The second account is in Luke’s Gospel. The two accounts compliment and supplement each other. They help us understand how the disciples reacted to the ascension and how we are to react today.

In Acts, Luke writes that, when Jesus ascended into heaven, “[The disciples] were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. “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.” Why were the disciples standing there? Perhaps it was in wonder and awe at what they had just seen. For those of you my age and older, do you remember going to an airport for the first time and watching planes take off and land? You could just stand there and watch and watch and watch. Here, the disciples had seen something much more awesome: the Son of God literally ascending upwards through the heavens. It is no wonder they stood there gawking.

However, maybe it was something more than that. Maybe there was a sense of sadness and lack of purpose now. Think of what they had been through. They had lived and learned with Jesus

for three years. They had come to know him as more than a Rabbi, but as the long promised Messiah and Son of God. They had experienced the excruciating sorrow of seeing him killed on a cross and then the unimaginable joy of seeing Him bodily rise from the grave to live again. And now....He was gone. If you have ever had to say goodbye to someone going away on a long journey in an airport or train station, especially if you don't think you'll ever see that person again, the feeling of sadness can be devastating. Jesus had told them to go and make disciples of all nations. He had always personally shown them what to do. How would they do it? Where would they go? What would they do now?

Sometimes, our reaction to our Lord's ascension is not all that different. We stand around here and gawk like the disciples did. We have just finished our celebration of Easter. It is something that we do in wonder and awe. After forty days of contemplating Jesus taking the sin and guilt of the entire world upon Himself and then suffering the punishment for that guilt and sin, including physical death on the cross and spiritual death in hell, we are overwhelmed with the news of Jesus' bodily resurrection from the dead. Not only does the event itself fill us with awe and wonder, but its meaning does as well. Our sin is forgiven, our guilt is removed, and our punishment is taken away. Jesus opens the grave, not only for Himself but for all who are in Him by faith. Death is no longer our strong enemy or our final destination. Death is the gate to life eternal. It is no wonder that we stand around here, spiritually gawking at the awe and wonder of it all.

But maybe there is more to it than that, just like there was more to it with the disciples. Maybe, like the disciples, we feel a sense of sadness and lack of purpose now that Easter is over and Ascension Day is here. We may feel sad that this great celebration is coming to an end. We also lack direction now. That's very true for pastors who make a big push to gear up for special Lenten services, Holy Week services, and Easter celebrations and are now left with a big let down. The same is true for members who have likewise been a part of this big celebration by participating

in these services, inviting friends and families to hear the message, and so on, and are left with the question, "Now what?"

Fortunately, we have a second account of the ascension which answers that very question. The disciples of our Lord did not continue to stand around, looking up into the sky, gawking in awe, feeling sad and empty and wondering what to do. Luke writes in His Gospel more about their reaction. He says, "While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God."

The disciples were not sad, but they were filled with joy. Why would anyone be filled with joy when their dearest Friend and loving Savior was suddenly taken up from heaven like that? There are two reasons. First of all, the disciples understood the reason for Jesus' ascension -- to sit at the right hand of God. In other words, Jesus was ascending to take up again His rightful authority, power, and glory as the Son of God. The disciples knew that this was good. Paul explains the meaning of that in our Epistle reading for this evening. He says of God's mighty power was "exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way." The disciples knew that they were not left alone to fend for themselves in an evil world, but that Jesus was indeed "in charge" and was ruling over everything with His mighty power for the sake of the church.

Secondly, they returned to Jerusalem and were continually in the temple, worshiping God. They remembered Jesus' command, "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." They had been given their mission to make disciples of all

nations and they had been promised the power with which to do that mission. Ten days later, Jesus kept His promise and sent the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. With the joy of the Gospel motivating them and the presence of the Holy Spirit empowering them, they went out and literally changed the world, making disciples of all nations. It is their bold testimony to Jesus Christ that is the reason that we sit here in Montana - thousands of miles away from where Jesus' life and ministry took place - sharing the same faith and hope that they did.

They did all this preaching and teaching, not only because they were empowered by the Holy Spirit, but also with the promise of the angels on that mount of ascension ringing in their ears, "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." What joy and excitement must have filled their hearts to serve the Lord in this way, knowing that He would return one day just as they had seen Him go to take them to be with Him in heaven.

As spiritual descendants of these apostles, this is the same kind of attitude that we can have as we celebrate Ascension Day. It is not a time to stand around, gawking in sadness at the end of our Easter celebration, but, rather, it is a time for joy to continue. Rather than seeing this as the end to our Easter celebration, see it as the continuation of the celebration of Christ's victory. The same Jesus who had power over sin and the devil for us on the cross, who had power over death for us in the empty tomb is the same Jesus who now has power over everything for us. As we face a world full of sin and evil which seems to be getting worse, we do not have to get sad or depressed. We know who is in charge "at the right hand of God the Father Almighty" and we know that He is ruling all things for the sake of the church.

Like the apostles, we don't simply rejoice, but we have purpose and meaning for our lives as a result of the ascension. Like them, we remain continually in church, praising God for all that He has done for us Jesus. We have the forgiveness for all of our sin and guilt. We already have victory over the grave even before we die. As Jesus said, "He who believes in me will live, even though he

dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.” Like the apostles, we are His witnesses of this message and hope to the ends of the earth. As they received the gift of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, so each of us has received that same gift of the Holy Spirit in our baptisms. As we are motivated to share the Good News of the joy that fills us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, so we are empowered to do just that through the presence of the Holy Spirit within each of us. We live our lives, not with a sense of aimlessness and drudgery, but with a sense of mission and urgency. Although we did not see His ascension up into heaven, we will certainly see His return to bring us home with him in heaven for all eternity.

So, now is a time to “move on”. It is time to move on with our celebration of the joy of Easter and Ascension by making every Sunday a “little Easter”. It is time to move on with the work the Lord has given us to do, rather than taking a summer vacation. We have the message of life which our dying world so desperately needs and the power of the Holy Spirit to enable us to share that message. It is good that you took time away from your busy spring schedules to be here for worship today. But don’t stand around here, as the apostles were tempted to do on that first Ascension Day, aimless and sad, but, with all of the joy that Ascension Day gives and all of the direction that Ascension Day supplies us, let’s move on! Amen.