

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, Seventh Sunday of Easter, May 8, 2016

What Comes Next?

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May 8, 2016

Acts 1:1-11 Luke 24:44-53

As I think you know, I am a Lectionary preacher, at least most of the time. I preach from the scripture texts which are prescribed for each Sunday of the church year. That is all well and good but it does present a problem in that the Lectionary totally ignores the secular calendar. It never considers Memorial Day, Independence Day, Veteran's Day, Thanksgiving, or other holidays like Mother's Day which we celebrate today. The Lectionary follows the church calendar, not the secular one. So if you have ever wondered why on some holidays my sermons don't address whatever holiday it is, that is the reason.

The Lectionary also ignores the fact that many days of Christian significance do not fall on a Sunday. It does suggest scripture for these dates but churches, except for the Roman Catholic Church, often do not hold worship services on those dates, particularly small churches like ours. We make up for it in a small way by joining with First Presbyterian to celebrate Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, and Christmas Eve but, unless they happen to fall on a Sunday, we generally do not observe Epiphany or All Saints Day. Then there is Ascension of the Lord which never falls on a Sunday.

Today we have a triple calendar conflict --- it is the Seventh Sunday of Easter, it is Mother's Day, and Ascension of the Lord was just three days ago.

That said, I was in a bit of a quandary about what to say today and which event to observe in my message.

Personally I don't particularly like to do more than acknowledge Mother's Day if for no other reason that that not all women are mothers. I prefer instead to acknowledge the contributions that all women make to the church and to the work of the Lord whether they are mothers or not, and I thank all of you ladies for what you do and will continue to do.

Reflecting on the two church events of this week, the seventh Sunday of Easter and the Ascension of the Lord, I have opted this morning to talk about the Ascension as theologically it is by far the more significant of the two.

The Ascension happened on the 40th day after the resurrection of our Lord and Savior. You can do the math. The resurrection was early on a Sunday morning so the Ascension had to have happened on a Thursday.

The Ascension was both an end and a beginning. It was the end of Christ's life on earth. What was next?

Did the mean the end of his ministry? Did his disciples feel lost? Did they go back to their old way of life as they did after the crucifixion? **No, No, and No!**

The Ascension was the start of an even greater ministry --- a ministry which would eventually cover the entire earth --- a ministry of eternal salvation. **What a ministry it is!**

As Jesus was lifted up into the heavens, two angels appeared and assured the disciples that Jesus would return in the same way that they saw him leave.

In the Jewish context, the fact that two angels appeared, not one, was highly significant in proving their credibility to the disciples. Deuteronomy 19:15 states, "*A matter must be established by the testimony of two or more witnesses.*" Further in Mark 13:26 we read Jesus' words, "*At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.*" The apostles were not distressed. Instead they were joyous and just ten days later at Pentecost they would experience the power of God in an even more astonishing fashion.

The apostles were very familiar with the Jewish scriptures and with ascension into heaven. Elijah ascended in a whirlwind with a fiery chariot. Enoch was "*no more because God took him away*". (Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary, Vol. 1, Clinton E. Arnold, ed., 2002). Others ascended, received revelations, and returned --- Enoch, Abraham, Isaiah, Baruch and Ezra. Moses was royally transported at the end of his life but Jesus' ascension was much more significant than either of these. "*...His ascension established his exalted position of glory and power over all of creation.*" (ibid).

The disciples were not disappointed --- they were overjoyed and returned to Jerusalem going to the temple where they remained blessing God.

Jesus' final words to them were, "*I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.*"

They didn't fully understand that promise but they did as Jesus said and stayed at the temple until the promise was fulfilled ten days later.

They had asked Jesus when he would return and he told them that only God knew and said "... *you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*"

The disciples, at least initially, probably thought that Jesus was referring to the Jewish diaspora and the Roman Empire. Little did they realize that he literally meant Jew and Gentile everywhere on Earth. Further that charge was not limited to the apostles. It was meant for all Christians, then and in the future including you and me.

A devotional in *These Days* (May 29, 2014) asked, "*Just how far is it to the ends of the earth? Will it require you to hop on a plane to Malawi? It may, but the ends of the earth might be right where you live: your family, a roommate, a co-worker, or the person at the check-out counter. Before Jesus ascended into heaven he told the disciples they would receive the Holy Spirit so that they would be prepared to be his witnesses. That same Holy Spirit has been given to us.*"

William Barclay said that the ascension was an ending --- the days with a flesh and blood Christ were over; it was a beginning because the disciples and us know that we have a Master from whom nothing can separate us; and it is a certainty that we have a friend in heaven. "*Surely it is the most precious thing of all to know that in heaven there awaits us that self-same Jesus who on earth was wondrous and kind. To die is not to go out into the dark; it is to go to him.*" (William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, rev. ed., The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1975).

The story of the Ascension of our Lord is continued through us. It is up to us, as we trust God, to make Jesus known to others.

Amen.

Note: Scripture quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible, 2011