

WITH EYES AND HEARTS OPEN – May 17, 2015

Scripture: Acts 1:10-11 (8)

Unison: Psalm 47

Hymns: 1) #204 “We Hail You God’s Anointed” 2) #260 “Hail the Day that Sees Christ Rise” 3) #527 “We Offer Christ”

CALL TO WORSHIP

Leader: Christ is alive. He is risen from the dead.

People: The Holy One calls us to worship and praise.

L: We are baptized with the power of the Holy Spirit,

P: We live with Christ in our hearts.

All: Sing praises to God, who fills the world with forgiveness and grace!

INVOCATION & LORD’S PRAYER

Blessed are you, O God, creator of all that is and all that will be. You sent Jesus to heal us and bless us, and to show us that your love is more powerful than death itself. Just as you transformed those first followers, fill us now with your power and grace, so that we may be the Body of Christ, in service to your world. We pray as Jesus taught us, “Our Father...”

Scripture: The Promise of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:1-11)

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over the course of forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While 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; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.’

The Ascension of Jesus

So when they had come together, they asked him, ‘Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?’ He replied, ‘It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But 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.’ When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards 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.’

THE SERMON

What on earth were they thinking, when they stood with Jesus and saw the heavens open? They'd just asked him if the time had come when Jesus would restore the kingdom of Israel. Maybe they thought it was the end of the Roman occupation. Maybe they thought it was the end of the world. But what it was, was the end of their old life. The end of their internship.

They'd already thought it was the end once, didn't they? That terrible Friday when Jesus was crucified, and that awful Saturday morning when they woke up and realized he was gone. Two of his followers, talking to a presumed stranger on the Emmaus road told him "the things about Jesus of Nazareth. Because of his powerful deeds and words, he was recognized by God and all the people as a prophet. But our chief priests and our leaders handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him. We had hoped he was the one who would redeem Israel." You can hear the heaviness in their account: we thought it was this, and then it wasn't. It was ended.

But it was not the end. Not at all. It was another beginning of the good news.

This story of Jesus ascending to heaven has interesting parallels and connections to the transfiguration, way back in Luke 9 (and the other gospels as well). In that story, Jesus selected a few of his followers, Peter, James, and John, and brought them apart, to a mountain top, where they saw two men. These turned out to Moses and Elijah, the two mighty prophets and leaders of God's people, alongside Jesus. And also, as it happens, the two people in the Hebrew Bible who ascended to heaven, who were taken up, and left their work to their chosen successors: Joshua and Elisha. There are many, many other parallels drawn between Moses and Elijah and the story of Jesus in the Bible, but for now, suffice to say, there they are. Lots more happened on that mountain: just as in his baptism, the voice of God proclaimed "This is my Son, My Chosen; listen to him!" This confirmed what Jesus told his apostles before their mountain climb: that he would suffer and die and be raised, and how his followers would need to deny themselves, take up their cross and follow, how those who would lose their lives for Jesus' sake would in fact save their lives, discover their true purpose. You wonder if Peter and James and John stood on another mountain, Olivet, and looked up at the heavens after Jesus was taken up, and thought, Woooooah.

But! There wasn't much time for looking allowed! While they were still gazing at the sky, two men—like the angels at the resurrection—appeared and asked them why they were standing there looking up, and told them that Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven. That is, by the power of God, in the way Jesus told them, in God's time.

It's not an ending, that is to say....it's another beginning of the good news.

This departure of Jesus must have been very confusing for the apostles. We know that God removed Jesus from the scene physically, setting the scene for the coming of the Holy Spirit, which will descend on the apostles, the other disciples, and ultimately thousands, millions, billions, empowering—LITERALLY INSPIRING—them to carry on the work begun by their master, and now, entrusted to them. If it's not too earthbound to say, it's like all those westerns, where the cryptic inspiring new sheriff comes to the town of, let's call it, Sandy Gulch. He overcomes tremendous obstacles and challenges and threats to his very life as he cleans up the situation, establishes justice, gives a bunch of wisdom to a reformed sidekick of some kind, and then....rides off into the sunset while the whole town watches, with their hands over their hearts. They are determined to do what? To be sure that his work is continued. To carry on the legacy. To tell the story of how they were changed by his presence. To make sure their children and their children's children, and their children's children's children know this story and how it has shaped their community. In the Bible story, they watch Jesus rise up into the sunset...er, clouds....and they go down from the mountain, the twelve, and other disciples including certain women and Jesus' mother and brothers, and they wait for what will happen next.

Except they aren't just waiting around. They are gathering. What do you imagine they are talking about? How could they talk about anything else? They appoint a new apostle. Matthias, to take the place of Judas, and name what they are doing as bearing witness to Jesus and the resurrection. There are about a hundred and twenty of them, at that point; probably about the same number as in our fictional western town of Sandy Gulch.

Jesus rising into the heavens was not the end of his ministry, of what he was doing in the world; it was another beginning.

Now the message will be carried by the followers of Jesus. On May 31, we'll recall the day of Pentecost. But that waiting time in between was important. We are in a waiting time too, aren't we? We are followers of Jesus after the Ascension too. And the angelic question comes to us too: why are you standing looking up to heaven?" Which to me says, hey, the work is right here, down off this mountain, on this earth, with these people. Pretty soon, God will come in wind and fire to them. But God also comes to us, as we hear this story, as we see the power of what Jesus taught, as we claim the power of the resurrection, the good news that God's love wins over everything....everything! Even death!!

How might we express this? How might we show this? By holing up in a sacred place away from the world, where we can feel we are near to what happened? Pete suggested at the transfiguration that they build tents for Elijah and Moses. But no, that was not the point. The point there was that he and the others were being given a vision to share: of the divine purpose being worked out through Jesus. We have that vision too. The apostles, talking with Jesus, ask their urgent question: "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" They

were still stuck on the idea that the Messiah, the anointed one, would re-establish the throne of David to rule in righteousness and justice. That would be the end of everything wrong. That would be the fitting end of the story. But it's not an end....it's a new beginning. Jesus had a much broader vision than that: to establish the Kingdom of God through all the earth.

How are we to do that? How are we to cooperate with that? I think we want to be careful not to fall into the same small political categories that the apostles named. It's not about a nation: it's about all the earth becoming one people, just as all those disparate apostles became one. It's about wanting to respond to the great change that came with that special person, like the people of Sandy Gulch with the amazing lawman. As followers of Jesus, we want the same things: To be sure that his work is continued. To carry on the legacy. To tell the story of how they were changed by his presence. To make sure that our children and our children's children, and their children's children's children know this story and how it has shaped their community. But it doesn't end there. It's also about how we are now called to do the work. The great sheriff of Sandy Gulch didn't win all those people over by forcing them to believe certain things, by forcing them to act certain ways or else. He won them by challenging the unjust, taking the risk of conflict and harm to establish justice. Jesus could have compelled people to be a certain way: that was the last temptation of Satan, throw yourself off the temple and have the angels rescue you! Then they'll HAVE to believe in you! Jesus rejected that path, and took a different one. One that we actually can follow in, two these millennia later.

Our final hymn expresses this in such elegant and historically informed ways. As you can see from the notes at the bottom of the page, it comes from advice that the evangelist John Wesley, the father of Methodism, gave to a colleague as he departed to bring this gospel method to North America: "Offer them Christ." That is our work too, as we feed the hungry in body and spirit. As we care for the homeless and show them that they are always at home in God's love. As we lift up the equality of all people, not in our excellence but in our knowledge that God brings the excellence, and commands us to love one another. We offer Christ when we worship and pray, and when we take the values of justice, compassion, care, and peace out from worship into our world.

Learning about Jesus, discovering him alive in our hearts and imaginations....is not the end. It's a new beginning, every day, always the beginning of the good news of God's gracious love and care for all of us, the beloved Children of God.

Why are you looking up toward heaven? Go discover Christ, already at work in our world, and serve him there!

.....

We Offer Christ (#27, New Century Hymnal)

We offer Christ to all the world around us, born into faith, released from pride and shame;
embraced by love, we show how love has found us; at peace with God, we speak our Savior's
name.

We offer Christ from all our best traditions, by grace alone, amazed and strangely warmed,
created equal, stirred by freedom-visions, self-critical, prepared to be reformed.

We offer Christ the barrier-bestrider, whose fullness far exceeds our local view,
whose Spirit, breathing deep in every culture, brings Christ to us, the same, yet strangely new.

We offer Christ and, God-beloved, our Savior now offers us, born of the Spirit's kiss,
to love creation and creation's Lover, with skill, compassion, justice, care and peace.

Brian Wren

Words © 1989 Hope Publishing Company