

St. David's Episcopal Church, Wayne, PA
Ascension Day (Transferred to Sunday following), May 13, 2018
Texts: Acts 1:1-11 and Luke 24:44-53

"While blessing them, he 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."

What a difference a few weeks can make. At the Ascension the disciples are celebrating, filled with joy, but after the crucifixion they had scattered in fear. Then, worried that what had happened to Jesus would become their fate, they fled. When they finally did come back together, it was to huddle in a room with a locked door. They were totally disabled with fear. And, while we can imagine that some part of their minds remembered all the good things that Jesus had told them and instructed them to do, they were frozen in time. Without Jesus, they were lost.

I suspect many of us can relate to that situation. A great mentor, teacher, leader can do that to us. Even while we hang on to their every word when we are in their presence, even as they instill in us confidence and certainty in our own abilities, being on our own is a different story. Recalling their strengths, we minimize our own gifts and talents. How can we measure up? How can we possibly be capable of following them? Who will want to listen to us?

Then, think about the crowds that followed Jesus, crowds that stayed for long hours hanging on to his every word, long enough so that meal times came and went and Jesus worried about giving them something to eat. The disciples, too, had hung onto his every word as well, and that uneducated rather motley crew had certainly had their lives changed by Jesus. They believed him, believed his message strongly enough to make them leave their homes and jobs. But how could they ever carry on now that Jesus was crucified? Why the authorities might be breathing down their necks right now. And doubt began to set in, doubt about themselves, and even doubt about Jesus. Why, even Peter, the Rock, was so overcome he denied ever knowing Jesus, not once but three times.

But then, Jesus had returned. After three short days they had seen him again, their risen Lord! He was back. All was right again. Well he did look a little different, he wasn't always immediately recognized, and he did appear suddenly in the middle of a locked room. But looking at the empty cross and tomb, at this somewhat changed Jesus, this was a normal as it would get so they were content. They could still sit at the feet of their Lord, their teacher.

Over the next forty days as they walked and talked with the risen Lord, their faith was renewed and strengthened and they began to be changed. They began to understand. He had promised to return. Things were exactly as he had said, after all. Their confidence in his promises and in their own abilities grew. They became ever more certain that his Spirit would always be with them, as he said it would. As their confidence grew, they began to get ready to spread the Good News. They began to understand that they would be the ones to live out the Gospel. So, when their Lord was taken from them again, when the clouds obscured his movement from this reality to the reality we call heaven, they were filled with rejoicing and blessings. They knew what they were to do. They had direction, a plan, a roadmap.

When Jesus ascended, the proclamation of the Good News would no longer be by him. Now the disciples were the ones to proclaim the Good News as they lived out the faith Jesus had given them. As they waited those few days between Ascension Day and Pentecost (next Sunday) they prayed and prepared themselves to receive the Holy Spirit that Jesus had promised to send. They moved from disciples willing to gaze at the empty cross and tomb and be content that Jesus was still with them to do the heavy lifting, to becoming disciples willing, eager, and ready to witness to the living Christ. And by their witness the word began to spread in and around Jerusalem, and finally to the ends of the earth.

For when Jesus moved from earth to heaven, there weren't many witnesses, but the result of that event was immense. Up until that moment, Jesus was seen only where he was, in and around the towns surrounding Galilee. Now, with his Ascension to sit at the right hand of the Father, Jesus was Lord of heaven and earth, present to all believers. This was no isolated heavenly event, but the moment that opened the way for the Good News to spread through the world forever, wherever people live in the Spirit and the Spirit abides in them.

And folks, that's where we come into the story. We are the continuum of those early disciples, just as the young girls and boys singing in today's All Choir Sunday, the young people in the 2018 Confirmation Class will be our continuum. Those early disciple, we, and all the young witnessing Christians of today – the past, the present, and the future disciples, are the Body of Christ on this earth, are the presence of God through Jesus Christ in this world, and it is only as we live out that truth in our lives that the Gospel can continue to spread throughout the world, and to influence the world. We are the presence of God through Jesus Christ in this world, seen by all in how we treat one another, in our work, and in our service. And this is an awesome responsibility.

We have had forty-three days since Easter morning, and will have seven more until next Sunday, a total of fifty days – the fifty days of Easter – to move from gazing with contentment at the empty cross/tomb thinking that Jesus is still around to do the work, fifty days to become zealous, on-fire, Pentecost Christians who live constantly in God's presence, and respectfully share God's love with all people at all times.

When Jesus ascended and sent the Advocate, the Spirit of God to be with us, it stayed on earth. It is here in the midst of us, coursing through us and around us, always present if we but open ourselves to it. And when we open ourselves through prayer, meditation, and worship to receive, we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to go out into the world and lead the way both individually and corporately. This Spirit is not passive, not aggressive, but love-filled grace that enables us to share God's message of love and forgiveness to a weary, conflicted world.

So, today, Ascension Sunday, is the time for us to pause, give thanks to God for this shift of paradigm – this movement of Jesus from earth to heaven, and our ascension to becoming Jesus's body on earth. This is the time to give thanks and to tighten our belts, because the tongues of fire are coming.

Amen.

(Source: STW, 2003, The Rev. Judith Carrick)