

June 1, 2014

Acts 1: 6-14

When they were together for the last time they asked, “Master, are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel now? Is this the time?”

He told them, “You don’t get to know the time. Timing is the Father’s business.

What you’ll get is the Holy Spirit. And when the Holy Spirit comes on you, you will be able to be my witnesses in Jerusalem, all over Judea and Samaria, even to the ends of the world.”

These were his last words. As they watched, he was taken up and disappeared in a cloud.

They stood there, staring into the empty sky. Suddenly two men appeared—in white robes!

They said, “You Galileans!—why do you just stand here looking up at an empty sky? This very Jesus who was taken up from among you to heaven will come as certainly—and mysteriously—as he left.” Returning to Jerusalem

So they left the mountain called Olives and returned to Jerusalem. It was a little over half a mile.

They went to the upper room they had been using as a meeting place: Peter, John, James, Andrew, Philip, Thomas, Bartholomew, Matthew, James, son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, Judas, son of James.

They agreed they were in this for good, completely together in prayer, the women included. Also Jesus’ mother, Mary, and his brothers.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church?

THANKS BE TO GOD!

Sermon – “Life after Jesus – what next”

For a long, long time, centuries, Protestant Christians have spent an awful lot of energy distinguishing themselves from Roman Catholic Christians. It started with Martin Luther on some very specific items on faith and practice that he thought were not good. But it continued on through John Calvin, Calvinism being the root of Presbyterianism, and through John Wesley and through so many of the other Reformers. Throwing out the stained glass windows, the art in church and vestments and it went on and on and on, including feast days, holy days in the church year. And we got it right down to bare bones. They thought it was the best thing. I not hear to discredit the Reformers. I spent this week really digging into Ascension Day. I’ve come out of that feeling like what a terrible disservice this has been to all of us. But I also want to tell you that Ascension Day in the hands of many current Protestant theologians is something that they approach very ‘tongue in cheek.’ One of them is John Holbert, he is the professor Emeritus of Preaching at Perkins School of Theology in Dallas, Texas: This is what he says “You would look hard and long, and high and low to find an Ascension Day greeting card. Our card merchants, always on the look-out for another way to lure the great American buyer into the shops, has yet to discover this dramatic occasion as the source of increased sales.” I’m going to stop right there. Most of you are of a certain vintage... so I’m asking you to think back a little ways... Thanksgiving – what decorations did you put on the outside of your house, if any, Halloween,

Easter. Now we have dueling decorations on our streets. Elaborate decorations! So Holbert, I think, is whispering to the Hallmark card people, and Party Stores folks, saying “We’ve got Ascension Day... you know, there’s some possibilities here.” So he goes on to say “How have they missed Ascension Day balloons as an obvious tie-in, or Ascension Day climbing gear! Imagine! Follow Christ into the clouds!” Might be an app slogan for a Christian climbing firm or maybe not he says. But what he says as he goes along in this article is incredibly relevant and serious, and it spoke to me. Because, I think what happened on Ascension Day brings out a feeling that most of us go through. Fairly often, as believing people, it’s that moment when you find yourself asking, “Is there a God?” When you feel that sense of aloneness and vulnerability. You wonder if your own faith is enough to get you through what’s coming next. And it’s that candle being extinguished. Did you feel something when I extinguished the Christ candle that we have on every Sunday? It feels kind of odd, kind of bleak. We have moments, everyone does, when we feel that darkness, that abandonment. I am convinced that Luke was very intentional, that when he ended his story of the life of Jesus, in the book of Luke, the Gospel. Then he starts telling his story of the Christian church, it starts with the Ascension. Not with Pentecost, but with the Ascension. Because it was important to him. It was that space in time where Jesus is physically gone and before the Holy Spirit comes and the fire and the noise and everything else... before all that excitement. It’s that dark, quiet, vulnerable time... and that’s where Luke starts. Because that is the human experience. It is not always the fireworks of Pentecost. There are a lot of Ascension Day times. Those times when we can’t quite capture the presence of the risen Christ, in that moment in our life. Or when we look at the work to be done and we wonder - how are we going to do it on our own. Ascension Day is when, one person said, we receive our spiritual marching orders. Which is a wonderful way to put it. You’re in charge now. Not me. There must be somebody better equipped to do this. But it’s us.

Another writer, Robert De Moor, is a member of the reformed church of America. It’s part of the Calvinism tradition, from John Calvin, sort of through Presbyterianism and the reform church of America has connections with the Dutch Reformed Church from Holland. So he’s a specialist in worship and he wrote an article, 10 years ago, about how we have stepped away from Ascension Day. We are losing something important. He wrote – “Strange, we blow all the stops celebrating Christmas. Even though the bible is ‘mum’ on the time of year that Jesus began the humbling business of becoming our humble servant. Every year we fling open our church doors on Good Friday to celebrate how Jesus went through hell for us on the cross. But when Ascension Day, the crowning event of Jesus’s ministry comes around, reformed worshippers increasingly keep the large oak doors firmly bolted. We celebrate on a week day that Jesus became a baby, we celebrate that Jesus died and rose again. But when Jesus ascended to heaven and became Lord of the whole universe and poured out his good gifts including his everlasting life-giving spirit on all believers... those things can no longer incite us to exchange our channel changers and our garden tools for hymn books. Only a handful of believers still trickle into the church to appropriately dignify Christ’s coronation. What happened? It’s a good question. He goes on to remark that you will not find Ascension Day in Eerdman’s, that’s the publishing house out of Michigan, in their popular handbook to the history of Christianity, it’s not even in there. It doesn’t receive as much as a footnote in Willis and Walkers – A History of the Christian Church. And you don’t find anything out about it in the new dictionary of sacramental worship. So why is it that we just let it fall through the cracks –

why the decline, asks Robert De Moor. Well he ponders, maybe because it comes so soon after Lent and Easter, we're celebrated out, or because the church season is over by then. But I suspect the major reason is because we are being pulled by our culture. Santa's and Easter Bunnies provide endearing amusements that our culture advertises to a fault. So the media hype makes us see these events as important ones. But there is not much of a market for a risen Lord or for a Heavenly kingdom that will give this tired over-commercialized planet of ours a healthy, heavenly shake. So he places a challenge before us. He says that instead of setting the agenda for our culture, Christians have yielded to this secular calendar by default. Much as the Reformers did but now in reverse. Our society still gladly rings our wake-up bell for Christmas and Easter, as long it can unload some children's toys and Easter eggs on us. I laugh because the largest seller of chocolate is a Jewish family in Hamilton, now run by the girl I went to school with from kindergarten to grade 13. She always said thank you around Easter.

In lockstep we're all too happy to stuff Jesus back into the manger, drag him through Jerusalem's streets, and nail him back on the cross. But without a whimper we give up celebrating what should be the highlight of those yearly remembering exercises: the reality that Jesus no longer fits in any of those places here below. He's grown too big for them now! Even heaven cannot hold our Lord's Majesty, splendor, and empowering love. Because our brother-in-the-flesh ascended, his leadership, gifts, and Spirit flood our lives as well. So where's the feast? Why have we missed out on this?

A few weeks ago we talked about how big heaven was and how big is the love of God and who is the judge of who gets in there and we were remembered and we were reminded then that the door is wide open for anyone, because everything we know of God is that God's love is far bigger than ours, far more forgiving, far more accepting. So here we have on Ascension Day that Jesus can no longer be confined by a body, by time, by space, by place, all these things that it means to be human. So Jesus has ascending, this is what makes him the Messiah and not just another deceased person. He's ascended into heaven as Messiah, so that there are no more confines on what Jesus can be and do. We're told with those disciples and with those women who all gathered in that upper room after the ascension, we are told to wait and pray and listen, because what comes next is when we get that power, that energy, that opportunity to do the work of Christ in the world. We are not to look heaven-ward and wait for something splashy to happen. There are a lot of people sitting there and twiddling their thumbs in life waiting for the second coming of Christ and yet that's not what the ascension told us. It's not a waiting for Jesus to return, it's a waiting to hear the word to get moving. John Holberg writes again that too many Christians pray mightily for the second coming, and neglect completely the first coming. Rather than gaze to the sky waiting for magic, our Lord calls us to receive the Holy Spirit, in order that we might become witnesses of his truth. That word is important – witnesses. We're to wait for the truth that God rules in Life. Not like Niki or IBM. When we celebrate Pentecost next week the Spirit will fall on us again. But whether we become witnesses of God power or remain slaves to the world's power remains to be seen. But I do suppose I know the answer, it is far safer, far less demanding to be a spectator than a witness. Spectators write books about calculations. The ancient Italian Astronomer, Nostradamus wrote all these predictions and the fellow who used to march in front of the White House, telling us the day that the world was going to come to an end. These kind of speculators write books, hold seminars, that attract thousands, rake in huge amounts of loot, while prognosticating a

certain time for Jesus's return. Witnesses on the other hand, just witness to the truth of the Gospel, the truth of justice for the whole world, the love of enemies, the care for the marginalized and the outcast. That's the importance of this passage, that's why I'm more convinced than ever that we should mark Ascension Day each year. We're called to be witnesses not spectators. Jesus said "I'm leaving" and they said "Well who's going to take over?" and Jesus said "That's the wrong question." He said the Holy Spirit is coming, it's going to be you. And when the ascension happened they stopped and they looked and looked and looked until the intervention and we were told they were 2 angels. The angels said stop looking you have to be witnesses. Have any of you ever been a witness to a crime. A witness does things, they come forward and speak the truth. You make a choice to stay and tell the truth, and if it goes to court you are asked to tell that story in court. The whole point of that is to hold up the truth, it is to protect people. It is to work for the common good. We are participants, to be involved in this world. To make a difference. The Ascension is the event that triggered our involvement on Gods behalf into the world. For all these centuries now 'US', doing the work of God in the world. Working as Christ did, with compassion and justice, full of integrity and we are witnesses to that ascended Christ. Here when we worship, and mission work, but we are witnesses to the ascended Christ. We raise our children and grandchildren with those values. Treating strangers with respect and dignity. It was the moment that you and I became engaged and involved in the work of Christ. AMEN