

June 2, 2019

*"The Gift"*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Acts 1:1-11

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I'm sure you all know the old adage, "You can't see the forest for the trees," meaning you're so caught up in details that you fail to see the big picture. So since this is the last Sunday of Easter, next Sunday being Pentecost, I thought I would point out a very visible reminder of what Easter is all about – the big picture. And that is the cross. Now one of the most impressive things about our sanctuary is this cross hanging majestically from the ceiling. Some of you newer folks here may not know this, but as I understand, it was made from a hemlock beam that came from the original Main Street Methodist Church that was built in 1847. So it's over 170 years old!

Anyway, this cross, "the" cross is really the embodiment of our Christian faith. However, if someone from the first century were somehow to come into this sanctuary, he or she would think we had lost our minds. You see, at that time, the cross was the most frightening symbol one could imagine... because it represented crucifixion. And crucifixion was really a method of torture, not just a means of putting someone to death. The great Roman orator, Cicero, a master of many different languages, was once writing about a crucifixion in a letter and had to use all sorts of indirect expressions to explain it. Why? Because to describe a crucifixion directly was considered just too psychologically tormenting. And it was on the cross that our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ was crucified. So in the cross we see all of human evil and hatred and violence and institutional injustice: all placed upon him. And yet all of that was swallowed up in his words, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." Father forgive them for they know not what they do. And now the cross, just like the tomb, is empty. Because sin and death have been defeated, and Christ has risen. And that is the message of the cross, the message of Easter – that "God so loved the world that he gave his son as a sacrifice so that we might be saved from sin and have eternal life." And that is a message we must never forget. St. Paul emphasized this when he wrote, "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved it is the power of God."

Last Thursday was Ascension of the Lord Day, when Jesus ascended from the earth. It had been forty days since his resurrection, and now it was time for him to go back to heaven, back to the Father. Unfortunately, the significance of the Ascension is often overlooked by the modern church. We have special services for other holy days like Christmas, Baptism of the Lord, Ash Wednesday, Maundy

Thursday, Good Friday, Easter, and Pentecost. But most churches make little or no mention of the Ascension. And yet this story is of profound significance. The first reason is that the ascension marks the greatest moment of splendor for our Lord, Jesus Christ. For it is when Jesus ascends that he enters into his ultimate glory, where he is now known as King of Kings, Mighty God and Lord of the universe. Now if Jesus merely wanted to return to the Father, he could have just vanished, like he did after breaking the bread with the disciples he met on the road to Emmaus. But instead at the ascension, Jesus, in the presence of his disciples, literally was taken up into a cloud, with two men in white robes escorting him, and he disappears into the distance of the heavens. I'm sure many skeptics think this is just metaphor, but I for one, can't think of a better way for Jesus to go back to the Father in heaven. This was, in essence, his coronation ceremony. As Paul told the Ephesians, "Christ was raised and seated in the place of honor at God's right hand in the heavenly realms. And God has put all things under the authority of Christ and made him head over all things." The Ascension establishes Christ as the eternal King and Lord over all.

Now the second reason the ascension is important is because it assures us of our final destiny – heaven. Paul writes, "If, then, we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him." And Jesus promised, "Where I am, you will be also." And that is in heaven. Now heaven is obviously something people think about and wonder about. Books, movies and songs all reference heaven. It's interesting that "heaven" is mentioned five times in today's scripture. And I'm guessing that it's the desire of each and every one of us here to spend our eternity in heaven. Because the Bible affirms that heaven is a place where there is no stress or worry or fear, where all things are set right, where there is pleasure and peace and love abounding, and joy never ending. It says heaven is a place where "God will wipe every tear from our eyes. Death will be no more. Mourning and crying and pain will be no more." Jesus spoke continually about the kingdom of heaven, and described it as paradise, as a glorious banquet and feast, as a celebration, with joy and fellowship with God and with each other. He likened it to a pearl so beautiful, so desirable, so valuable, that someone would sell everything they own just to have it. And just think. If you know God to be a God who has tenderly brought you through difficult times, faithfully guided your steps, and blessed you with his presence in your life here on earth, then how much more will you know his love beyond the grave? When you revel in God's glory as you look out on the magnificence of the ocean or the splendor of mountains, forests, flowers, birds of the air, all his creation, and are awed, how much more will God's glory shine forth when you are with him in eternity? Yes, the Ascension story in today's scripture is a vivid reminder that our ultimate destination, like that of Jesus, is, well.... heavenly!

But there's a third reason Jesus' ascension is so important. Because in today's scripture, we hear Jesus' final words to his disciples. He tells them, "Do not leave Jerusalem until the Father sends you the gift he promised. (Which is...that) you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you." Now that's Pentecost, which we'll talk about next week. But today I want to talk about Jesus' final instructions: "You will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere, in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." "Be my witnesses!" These are words we shouldn't forget! They are just as relevant for us now as for the disciples two thousand years ago. In fact, based upon all that we see out there in the world, all the craziness, the dysfunction, the tension, the unhappiness, it's obvious there are many people today who are searching for meaning, for answers, for some real purpose for their lives. And what's more real than the peace and power and love of Jesus Christ. What's more real than the promise of forgiveness, the assurance that our life does have purpose and meaning, and finding hope in something greater than ourselves. And we, as Christians, as the church, have that to offer them.

And yet sometimes we are prone to forget that we can make an impact for Christ by what we say and do. Author Philip Yancey writes, "A believer prays, and heaven responds; a sinner repents, and the angels rejoice; a mission succeeds, and Satan falls; a believer rebels, and the Holy Spirit is grieved. (Yes), what we humans do here on earth decisively affects the cosmos. I believe these things, and yet somehow I keep "forgetting" them. I forget that my prayers matter to God. I forget that the choices I make today bring delight – or grief, to the ascended Lord of the Universe. I forget that it is my duty (and obligation) to help my neighbors to their eternal destination. Yes, (sometimes) I forget.<sup>1</sup> And that is why we're here today, to remember Jesus' final words to "be his witnesses."

Now no one said this is going to be easy. But note again Jesus' words. He's going to give us help – the gift God promised. "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you." And I know each and every one of you have all felt the prodding of the Holy Spirit. But the barriers of culture and secularism have not just made bearing witness to our faith harder, but they have made our own faithfulness more difficult by the pressures they put on us. So the first step in being an effective witness is to start with some basics. John Wesley had three simple rules which I think we should all follow: do no harm, do good, stay in love with God. Do no harm, do good, and stay in love with God. Sounds almost too good, too simple, to be true, doesn't it? So consider your personal interactions as you go through the day, your manners, your tone of voice. Consider the way you practice kindness and

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Yancey, "The Jesus I Never Knew" pg. 230

appreciation and joy. Now consider that if you follow these rules, if you allow that gift of God's own Holy Spirit to fill you and guide your thoughts and actions, it can not only transform you, but others as well. And what better way to be a witness for Jesus Christ!

Someday, heaven will be real for us – where all God's people will be redeemed, healed, and made whole. And where we will live in the presence of Christ our Lord. But for now, we, all of us, have work to do. “You shall be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere – in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, in Mashpee, Bourne, Marston Mills, and even in Falmouth” Amen.