

May 28, 2017

*"The Ascension"*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Acts 1:6-11; I Peter 4:7-11

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As many of you are aware, a couple weeks ago my husband, John and I went to visit my parents on their farm in Indiana. We returned on a Saturday, and, let me ask, what's the first thing most of us do when we get off an airplane? Right, go to the bathroom, which we did. I went first to the ladies room while John watched the bags, and then we reversed the process while John used the men's room. As I was waiting for him, there was a young man nearby talking to his mother on his cell phone. He actually had her on speakerphone, so I could hear the entire conversation. He told her it wouldn't be long before he would be arriving at her house for Mother's Day and that he had an uneventful flight. You could tell he was a good son by the gentle and caring manner in which he spoke to his mother. And he ended the conversation with the words, "I love you Mom," and she said the same back to him. And then she added, "Don't forget to say a prayer to God for the safe plane trip." He said that he indeed would do that. I thought to myself, "Not too many people would express their love and faith so openly... he must not be a New England native." As he ended his call, he noticed me, and nodded his head, and then he pointed at the cross I was wearing around my neck, and asked, "Christian?" "Yes," I replied, and we exchanged some pleasantries. When John came out of the restroom, we hurriedly had to say goodbye, but as I was leaving he said to me something that... well, I can only describe it as beautiful. He said, "It was nice meeting you, and I'm sure we'll meet again someday in heaven."

Heaven. That place of eternal life, that place of glory. Which is exactly where Jesus Christ was heading back to in today's Scripture. "As they watched, he was taken up and disappeared in a cloud." Now, I think it would be safe to say that most people are fascinated by the idea of heaven. I mean, just look at all the books and movies about heaven. And, bear with me here, how many of you remember the date, May 21, 2011 at 6 pm? You will when I remind you that was the day when Harold Camping, a self-proclaimed minister of the Word, declared that Christ would return and the rapture would start. He said the saved would be taken up into heaven, and for the following five months, there would be fire and brimstone and plagues on the earth, with millions of people dying every day, culminating in the final destruction of the world in October of 2011. Obviously, Camping was a knucklehead. Particularly since this "minister of the Word" chose to ignore Jesus' own words, "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his authority." But even though Camping's warnings were met with ridicule by many, though taken seriously by some, his message about getting to heaven was something

people instinctively wanted to hear and talk about. Because this story received an incredible amount of press. All the major news outlets reported on it. It's probably the only time in history that Fox News and MSNBC reported the exact same facts about the same story. Well, of course, Jesus' return and the rapture didn't happen, and Harold Camping disappeared into well deserved obscurity. But this event proved one thing. Getting into heaven, was not only news worthy, but an overwhelmingly popular notion.

In fact throughout the ages, painters, poets and preachers have all been put to the test trying to imagine it. I'm sure every one of us here has our own picture of heaven and what it's going to be like. And although I don't know exactly what to expect, I'm pretty sure it's not "streets paved with gold, and angels with wings playing harps all day." But Jesus did compare heaven to a great treasure, a pearl of great value, and said it will be like a banquet, a feast, a celebration, where there is joy and fellowship with God. It's where, the Bible tells us, "God will wipe every tear from your eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more." Which tells me that heaven is going to be everything wonderful we can think of, and even more. So is it any wonder that the disciples were just standing there looking up. I mean, put yourself in their shoes. You're watching Jesus, ascending to this wonderful and glorious place. There, before you, is the bright vision of heaven, in contrast to the harsh reality of the world around you. And given the choice of being here or going with Jesus to heaven, who wouldn't be looking up, hoping somehow you might be able to go with him. The angels, however, admonish the disciples, saying, "Why do you just stand here looking up at an empty sky? This Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come in the same way you saw him go into heaven." You see, they knew that until Christ returned in glory, there was work for the disciples to do right here.

That's why the Ascension is not simply a "bon voyage" to Jesus. It is not simply upward in focus. It has a downward and earthly dimension as well. Because Jesus left his disciples with the instructions we heard today, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." And that is where you and I come in. Because Christ's message is not only for those disciples, but for us as well. For we, too, have been given the Holy Spirit and Christ instructs us to be his witnesses in the world. For we live in a world that is starving for Christ and his message of love. A world that is impoverished in spirit, and that everyday seems to devise new ways to instill fear and anxiety, and take the joy and peace and happiness out of our everyday living. Which makes our job of being witnesses all that much more important.

Because although the Bible is filled with the good news of Jesus Christ, many still don't know, don't read it, don't understand. And so, it's not the Christ of Galilee teaching and performing miracles, nor the Christ of Calvary suffering for our sins nor the Christ of the Resurrection defeating death, nor the Christ of two thousand years ago that will change and save them. No, they must be saved by the Christ of today, the present and living Christ. The Christ in you!

Did you hear that? The Christ in you! And that's where our second Scripture from St. Peter comes in. Listen again, "The end of all things may be near! So above all, maintain a constant love for one another. For love covers a multitude of sins." Above all – love. And isn't it true – people are searching for love. The greatest evils of humanity are caused by a lack of love. The pain and suffering that's inflicted, the anger and prejudice we see, so many of the addiction problems, the misguided culture. All because we don't love all others the same way Christ loves us. Because we don't treat all others the same way we want to be treated. Remember – Christ in you. So what can you do? You can go out today and love. Love that person you know who's unlovable. Accept that person who lives and thinks differently than you. Help someone who's struggling. Forgive that person who has hurt you. Walk the extra mile...again. Bring peace and patience where there is tension. Encourage and build up someone who's down, feeling depressed. Visit or call someone who's alone and lonely. Above all, maintain a constant love for one another in all your words and actions.

I want to close with a story about my late mother-in-law. I was reminded of the story by John, after the last Men's Breakfast. Yes, men, you have a spy in your group that leaks all sorts of information on a scale with that of the White House. But, getting back to the story: my in-laws lived in Florida and my father-in-law loved to go to the dog track. So when we visited, it was an event for them if we took them to the track because Dad so enjoyed it. Regretfully, the cast of characters at a dog track in Florida in the middle of a hot afternoon can sometimes make for a sorry sight. For there were some obviously down and out people, addicted gamblers, betting their last few dollars on some poor old greyhounds. Well, one day, my mother-in-law and I went to the bathroom and encountered one of them – a disheveled heavysset woman confined to a wheelchair. Now, thirty-five years ago there were few, if any, handicap or easily accessible, bathrooms. And this woman was struggling to open the door and get into the stall. My mother-in-law went up to her and asked if she could help. She then wheeled the woman into the stall, and helped her out of her chair and onto the toilet. Then she waited for her to finish and she helped her to clean up.

"Above all, love one another." To tell you the truth, as I stand here today and think back, I felt pretty small next to my mother-in-law that moment. But I was so proud of her! And you know what - I can't wait to tell her that when we meet again someday, in heaven. Amen