

North Kildonan United Church

16th May 2021 ~Rev. Don Johnson

“Hail the Day that Sees Him Rise”

Luke 24: 44-53

Acts 1: 1-11

Grant, O God, that in the written word and through the spoken word, we may behold the living Word, our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Hidden in amongst the seasons and special days the church observes is Ascension Day, which we are marking this day. Because the actual day falls on a Thursday, which co-incidentally is when we are recording this service, it's easy to overlook the significance of the Ascension.

In the church calendar, Ascension Day is forty days after Easter and Pentecost is fifty days after Easter. In the biblical accounts, after his resurrection Jesus made many appearances to his followers, some of which we have heard in our various gospel readings throughout Easter. These appearances were the needed proof for the disciples, for people like Thomas for instance, proof required for them to believe that Jesus did indeed rise from the dead. In his teachings, Jesus promised that after him would come the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, the Advocate, the One who inspires the people of God with wisdom and direction, with power and compassion. And with that gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the Church would begin.

But Pentecost is next week and today we focus on the Ascension.

The gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles both describe the Ascension event as Jesus being lifted up from the earth to heaven. A dramatic, mystical, and shall we say mysterious, departure from the world for Jesus.

Charles Wesley, in his great hymn for Ascension, puts it this way:

*Hail the day that sees him rise, taken from our wondering eyes,
Christ, awhile to mortals given, reascends his native heaven.*

Wesley's third verse fleshes out the account more fully:

*Though returning to his throne, still he calls the world his own;
Him though highest heaven receives, still he loves the world he leaves.*

And the fifth and final verse:

*Still for us he intercedes, his prevailing death he pleads,
Near himself prepares our place, first-fruits of our human race.*

It's tempting to get caught up in the mechanics of how the Ascension happened, tempting and probably not helpful. But this account is an essential part of our Christian story and of the birth of the Church.

During his earthly ministry, Jesus went about doing good, as they say, teaching and preaching and healing and feeding and more. His message was good news to the poor and the rejected, it was challenge to those who oppress and put down others, it was hope when hope seemed to be in such short supply.

But now, as part of God's plan, the good that Jesus went about doing, all those life-giving, hope inspiring, kind and gentle acts he did, all this and more, become the task, the challenge, the responsibility of those who would follow Jesus.

Jesus taught his followers how to change the world and then told them to put that change into action. His followers would not be alone in this mission; the Holy Spirit would be with them, empowering them to bear witness to Christ as they spread the gospel throughout the world.

The message of the Ascension is simple. We are now the ones to continue the work of Christ in the world. St Teresa of Avila, who lived in the 1500s, has this prayer attributed to her, a prayer that so wonderfully sums up our task.

*“God of love, help us to remember
that Christ has no body now on earth but ours,
no hands but ours, no feet but ours.
Ours are the eyes to see the needs of the world.
Ours are the hands with which to bless everyone now.
Ours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good.”*

Attributed to St Teresa of Avila (1515-82)

The reading from Acts ends with these words.

While Jesus 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.'

Basically, they are saying it's time to stop staring at the clouds and get going with the work Christ has entrusted all of us to do. As the hands, feet, eyes and voice of Christ, we are called to be in mission, sharing the good news in word and in deed. Janet Nightingale puts it this way:

*When we stand gazing upwards, bring us down to earth:
With the love of a friend,
Through the songs of the sorrowing,
In the faces of the hungry.*

*When we look to you for action, demand some work from us:
By your touch of fire,
Your glance of reproof, your fearful longing.*

*As ruler over all:
Love us into action.*

*Fire us with your zeal,
Enrich us with your grace,
To make us willing subjects of your rule.*

There is another aspect about the Ascension that is particularly significant for us these days. According to Christian tradition, Christ ascended forty days after the resurrection but the Holy Spirit didn't descend upon the apostles until ten days later. The exact chronology is not important. What is important is that for a period of time, the apostles were living in an in-between time, a time of wondering and anticipation, a time of uncertainty and mixed emotions, a time of hope and fear.

The disciples remembered the promises Jesus made to them but perhaps they didn't realize what it would mean when Jesus was actually gone from them. Perhaps their looking to the clouds was their hope that Jesus would soon come back down to them.

But that was not to be. The disciples were now to live in that uncomfortable space we know as between. Between what was and what will be, but not being in either place. Between is a time of waiting and speculation, faith and doubt, hope and fear. Between can be a time of impatience and frustration and it can be deeply painful.

We know what living in-between is all about. We have been living that way for over a year now. We wait for good news, for the promise that this will soon be over, soon will be behind us. We so want to turn the page of this terrible story and encounter a chapter without pandemic, without lockdown, without closed schools and closed churches. And we know that page turning will eventually happen, that a new chapter will begin, that there is light at the end of this tunnel we find ourselves locked into, and that light is growing brighter, even if at present it doesn't seem that way.

Perhaps the story of the Ascension is a story that encourages us to be patient and to live with the uncertainties of life, hard though that can often be. Living in the between time is a time of wondering and waiting, but not a time without hope. We will come out of this pandemic as changed people, but how that change manifests itself in our own lives, well, to a great degree that is in our own control. When it is over, how will we be? Will we be grateful and relieved, resolved to be more loving and caring, more apt to cherish those in our lives; will we work at stronger connections to our church, our clubs, our organizations we used to enjoy; will we try to re-establish those habits and practices we so missed during lockdowns? Will we have learned important truths about ourselves and how we see the world?

I'm inclined to think that the disciples needed that period of time from the departure of Jesus to the arrival of the Holy Spirit so that they could prepare for the next stage of their discipleship. The fullness of time is a powerful biblical concept, for time helps us forgive, it helps us heal, it teaches us wisdom and patience and appreciation.

So we live between what was and what will be, and as Christian people we live between memory and hope, always looking ahead, trusting that Christ is with us and never lets us go.

Years ago, in another church I served, during the summer we would gather whoever was interested and do day trips to various places in our city.

One place was a church which had magnificent artwork over its main doors, as well as being beautifully decorated inside. In describing the artwork outside, the priest made an interesting comment. He spoke of the history of the piece, saying it was the sizable gift of a brother and sister. But there had been a fair amount of controversy before the piece was created and installed, to the point that the project might not happen. Finally, all was resolved and the work was installed, to the absolute joy of everyone.

The comment the priest made was this, more or less as I remember it.

"The controversy beforehand was like a mother in the midst of labour pains, but once the delivery happens and the baby is born, all that pain is put behind her. So too, once our icon was in place, we put all the pain leading up to it behind us, and focussed on the joy of the gift we had received and the delight of the artistry."

So too do we hope, we pray, as we look forward to our day of deliverance.

And we remember always:

God is with us. We are not alone. Thanks be to God. Amen.