

Sermon for May 8, 2016 – “Sequel”

Ascension Sunday (observed), Year C – Texts: Acts 1:1-11; Luke 24:44-53

About five years ago a headline grabbing prediction of Jesus’ return was proven wrong. Harold Camping, a preacher from Oakland, California, had predicted that Jesus Christ would return on May 21, 2011. Believers, said Camping would be taken up to heaven in the rapture and that there would follow five months of fire, brimstone and plagues on Earth, with millions of people dying each day, culminating on October 21, 2011, with the final destruction of the world. After May 21 passed without the predicted incidents Camping said he believed that a “spiritual” judgment had occurred on that date and that the actual physical rapture would occur, as he’d previously predicted, on October 21, 2011. He was wrong then too. He’d also been wrong back on September 6, 1994. Lots of people have been predicting the end of the world for quite some time now but despite the fact that they’ve been wrong every single time, despite the fact that Jesus himself said “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, only the Father” people keep right on making these predictions. In fact, the “end times” industry has only grown and continues to thrive. So much so that the basic question of when and how the world will end underlies much of Christianity, certainly American Christianity. But, truth be told, the question has been on the minds of Christians from the very beginning.

In our first reading the disciples ask Jesus: “**Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?**” The apostles’ question sounds contemporary two millennia later as believers gaze heavenward and count down until the end of the world, while others with a less definite timetable still await a rapture. Meanwhile, on the other side of the divide, scoffing at such expectations is easy especially after announced deadlines pass. Jesus’ response sounds something of a rebuke to Rapture-enthralled Christians: “**It is not for you to know the times that the Father has set by his own authority.**” But what if – what if – the apostles’ question wasn’t as screwy as we might assume? What if Jesus was only rejecting their **need to know** and **not** the underlying question about the kingdom? True, their question refers to an earthly kingdom for Israel and not a heavenly destination. But in either case the imminent unfolding of cataclysmic events leaves little rationale for the Church and very little motivation. If Jesus’ answer is an outright “**no**”, as we’re prone to hear it, then we’re left on our own to figure out what in the world Jesus is doing. If now’s **not** the time then where **is** Jesus and what’s he **doing** post-Resurrection? We don’t know the proper ending to the Easter story that really only began with Jesus’ resurrection. And if now’s not the time, where are **we** and what are we supposed to be doing? If there’s no clear timetable our impatience with a lack of easy answers often leads us to make certain assumptions. Mainly, that it’s **our** responsibility to take matters into our own hands and bring about the kingdom all by ourselves. The problem is that human efforts which, unfortunately, includes violence and the crushing burden of human failure are our lot. But Luke, as Jesus himself often did, offers us a **third** option.

Unlike the other gospel writers who end their narratives with varied accounts of Jesus’ resurrection, Luke writes a sequel. Most modern sequels, especially movies, represent an unfortunate lack of creativity. They bring back familiar, popular characters, put them into new situations, and try to recapture the chemistry of the original. Although there are exceptions, they rarely live up to their original because they lack any compelling reason for their existence other than wringing more cash out of audiences. But Luke, who launches his second volume with the apostles’ (supposed) bad question and Jesus’ (assumed) rejection, authors a worthy sequel of epic proportions.

And, curiously, Luke is also the only gospel writer to depict the ascension, not once but **twice**, as if to underscore its importance. More than a heavenly lift-off, foreshadowing how believers will be snatched up to heaven, the ascension for Luke signals that Christ's reign has already begun now, in the middle of history, not merely reserved for some future time. What this means is that in understanding this, the Church finds its rationale, its reason for being, in the **present. Here and now.**

Let's try to get a little perspective on this... The ascension heralds the exaltation of Jesus in the **middle** of a story. A story that begins in the realm of King Herod, in Luke chapter one and ends right under Caesar's nose in Acts twenty-eight. The Church, despite the whole "separation of church and state" thing, is a political entity. As such, like it or not, we are members of a new polity. That is, a particular form of government that exists within a larger one. In this context the Ascension gives time, space, and rationale for the Church to be the Church. Everywhere believers go, they're accused of turning the world upside down because they announce the reign of another king named Jesus. But it's not the story of the Church bringing the kingdom to fruition or reforming society. In some ways it should be but it's not... far from it. It's a story of the Church gasping for breath as she runs to catch up to what the Spirit of Jesus is **already** doing in the world. First, the apostles appoint a twelfth to fill the slot abandoned by Judas but the Spirit's **less** interested in maintaining structures than in deluging the Church with power.

As we heard 2 weeks ago, a dozing Peter requires a vision repeated not once or twice, but three times to awaken him to the fact that Gentiles are now part of the family of God. The Spirit redirects Paul from evangelizing Asia and gives him a vision of a man from Macedonia. A man who, just to keep Paul on his toes, turns out to be a woman named Lydia! This second volume, the Book of Acts, begins with a word about "all that Jesus began to do and teach." A sequel is necessary because the story's hero has still many more acts remaining to accomplish. After Easter, what compels Luke is **still** Jesus.

Even post-Resurrection, the central character in this drama around which everyone and everything revolve is still Jesus. Even if he is, for the most part unseen, Jesus is never far away. He's somewhere just off-stage directing the action. It might be more accurate to call Luke's sequel the Acts of the Ascended Jesus, instead of the Acts of the Apostles. Christ the King has work for the Church to do and supplies power from heaven, the Holy Spirit, for this work. The way of the Kingdom has been fully vindicated.

In the Ascension, the Church sees Christ enthroned above, still incarnate and empowering our obedience to the way of the Kingdom. The way of suffering, serving, selfless love that announces good news to the poor and release for the captives. Luke writes a gospel sequel because Jesus is **still** acting and teaching. So, the question then as now isn't **when** Jesus is returning, but whether we'll learn to catch up to what He's doing now and begin to look outward instead of heavenward because to look outward around us is to see the work that remains. Listen again to the first verse of our first reading which is the very first verse of the Book of Acts... "**In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven.**" Wait a minute, **began** to do? What does Luke mean by "began to do"? Didn't Jesus complete everything He was sent to do? Doesn't His ascension mean that He has finished his work? I mean, He, Himself, cried out, "It is finished" when He died on the cross. "Mission accomplished", what more's there to do? What's going on here? Is there really more to do? Of course there is – there's plenty more to do. Just look around. Looks kind of daunting doesn't it? More than a little scary, no? Kind of, yeah, but here's the thing, we don't celebrate the Ascension because it's forty-some days after Easter and it's what the church is **supposed** to do.

We don't celebrate the Ascension because the creed says Jesus rose into heaven to sit on the right hand of God. No, we celebrate the Ascension because we're no different from the early church. We're no different than the people who gathered around this story from the beginning to hear the news that they were going to receive power. And, perhaps even more importantly, we celebrate this day to be reminded that we have no power of our own and never will.

There the disciples were, this fragile little community, anxious and bewildered, watching their Lord leave them. But get this, they weren't sad. Quite the opposite. Luke's gospel tells us that they worshipped and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. They had an advantage over us. They **knew** they had no power of their own. Any power they would ever know would be given to them by the Spirit, and they aren't even told when or how. But someone in the group asks Jesus the practical question: **Are You going to restore the kingdom to Israel now?** Now, I need to point out here that this isn't a **faith** question, it's a **political** question. That's the question you ask when your candidate comes out on top and you want to know when the platform's going to be implemented. It's the wrong question to be asking, but it's always all right with Jesus to ask the wrong question.

"God knows the answer, but we don't get to," Jesus says.

"Stop worrying about having things the way you want them and wait for something else..."

"Wait for the power that's coming."

"A gift is on the way. Wait for it."

It seems to me that we live in a time and place deluded by the notion that everything's up to us. To join a church is to stand up and heckle that idea. Whenever people gather around a baptismal font or in front of the church to be ordained, or installed to church office, or to become members. They publicly proclaim that they rely on a power beyond themselves. That they believe in God whose grace sustains them in **all** things. Our Book of Order contains these words: The Church strives to be faithful to the good news it has received: Making disciples of all nations in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit...Sharing with others a deep life of worship, prayer, fellowship, and service...Participating in God's mission to care for the needs of the sick, poor, and lonely...To free people from sin, suffering, and oppression; and to establish Christ's just, loving, and peaceable rule in the world. The Church is to be a community of hope rejoicing in the sure and certain knowledge that, in Christ, God is making a new creation. The Church is to be a community of love, a place where sin is forgiven, reconciliation is accomplished, where the dividing walls of hostility are torn down. The Church is to be a community of witness pointing beyond itself through word and work to the good news of God's transforming grace in Christ Jesus its Lord. The church is to be a community of faith entrusting itself to God alone even at the risk of losing its life. Wait – lose its own life? What do you mean "lose its own life"? I mean it literally...But that's a whole 'nother sermon...

Anyway, I think I've made my point... And my point is that, yeah, there's work to be done. Lots of work to be done, without question. We are to continue the work that Jesus began. Luke's sequel narrates a story that Christ's Spirit beckons us to join as we await his return.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.