

***Finding Our Place in the Story©***

Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53

Ascension Sunday, May 8, 2016

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What a journey we have been on together! Think about it ... it really started during Advent as we prepared and waited for the celebration of Jesus' birth – Immanuel, coming to enter into flesh and blood, to become human like us.

We waited and prepared our hearts and minds so that we could be fully open to new messages from the old, old story. And then, finally, Christmas came and through the Christmas season we sang joyous hymns – Christmas carols, keeping that love of Christmas in our hearts as best we could.

But, it seemed before we knew it, Jesus was grown and being baptized. Isn't that just the way it is with our kids. They don't seem to stay little for very long. (In Jesus' case – at least in the Bible – it's only a couple of weeks!)

Ash Wednesday we found ourselves in a completely different mood from Christmas. But we went together on the journey of Lent, allowing the ashes to be placed on our foreheads, being willing to have the courage to turn our Christmas joy into the hard work of looking at our hearts; reflecting on our lives, repenting of our sin; and, of course, reflecting on the life, the passion, and the death of Jesus – on all that he endured for our forgiveness and salvation.

And then, again, joy came! Great joy, as we heard once again the glad news that Jesus was resurrected from the dead. I read an article this week from one of the journals I read that suggested we really might think about making Easter the biggest celebration. Yes, it's amazing that Jesus – God in the flesh – was born as we are; that he became human.

While Christmas is awesome, Easter is the greatest foundation of our faith. The resurrection of our Lord is what we hold as the greatest, most amazing event. God, in God's power and love, allowed his Son to die for us but did not leave him in the grave. He raised him up to show us that even death cannot separate us from his great, amazing love.

So, once again, we celebrated. This time it wasn't a couple of weeks. This time we have celebrated with joyous songs of "Alleluia," praising God for what he has done through his Son, Jesus, the Christ.

The disciples must have been thrilled to have appearances from Jesus after he rose from the dead. We have heard through the scriptures that Jesus new, resurrected body was different. He did not need a door in order to enter a room. But, they knew it was him by how he looked. He looked like himself. He looked like Jesus, although somehow different. On some occasions, it took a minute before they recognized him.

At first they weren't so sure it was him because, after all, they had seen him dead. But, once he showed his wounds – this resurrected body that still had the holes from the nails that had been driven in his hands and feet – they were satisfied that it was him. Or, when Mary was facing the empty tomb, not knowing what had happened, and thinking she was speaking to a gardener, it was when Jesus spoke her name that she suddenly recognized him.

And other times when the risen Lord appeared, they watched him eat fish. He was no ghost. He was Jesus come alive again with a new body that was different, yet seemed much the same.

And so we wonder – or, at least I do – if that is how it will be with our new bodies. We say together fairly often that old, old statement of faith – **The Apostles' Creed** that states towards the end that we believe in the resurrection of the body. (I hope if my new body is the same, that it will at least be a little lighter and maybe a few years younger looking. Or, maybe once we get to our heavenly home none of that will even matter.)

But, as it is said, "all good things must come to an end." Why do we say that? And does it really have to be? Do all – I mean ALL good things end? That may have been how the disciples felt for a short little time, anyway. Luke says Jesus led them out of the city of Jerusalem and into Bethany, which was a couple of miles away.

And then they watched as he was lifted up into the heavens. But does Luke say, they stood there watching, sad, someone saying, "all good things have to come to an end?"

Not at all! Because Jesus was blessing them even as he was taken up. And they were worshipping him and praising God.

It would have been kind of an empty ending if Jesus had just made those appearances during the 50 days after his resurrection, but as time went on they would become fewer and fewer until, one day, he just appeared no more. There would have been no closure; no understanding; no clear direction.

But, Jesus gave them instructions so it would be completely clear as to what they were to do. He opened up their minds and reminded them of all the Scriptures that pointed to his life, death and resurrection; that told of the great, amazing grace we all would have – forgiveness of sins for all who repent.

And then he promised the Holy Spirit that would fill them with power and direct them in their lives and ministry moving forward. He directed them to go back to the city of Jerusalem and wait there until the Holy Spirit came upon them.

Next Sunday, we will hear once again what happened on the Day of Pentecost when Jesus' promise was fulfilled. The disciples truly were filled with a power that was so different than what they had personally known before. They had a boldness, a courage in them that helped them to preach as Jesus had directed them to do.

So where are we in this story? We have spent the last six months observing the birth, the life, the death and resurrection of our Lord. We have gone through this cycle together and hopefully, you've been challenged to reflect and to act on what we've learned from Jesus.

But at this point, we could look at it as the last chapter of a very intriguing story. We could consider Jesus' ascension into heaven as we might look at the last page of a good book – that page saying “The End.”

We *could* do that, but you know we're not going to do that. If the disciples had considered Jesus' ascension as the end, and just gone back to their old lives, would we still be hearing the story today?

Think about that. There would probably be no Church, no faith, no promise, no hope. Christmas would likely not exist – or it wouldn't be about the birth of Immanuel – of God coming to be with us.

Easter would simply be that old pagan event – an empty festivity that would have no great good news in its message. But, thank God, that's not what the disciples did. They followed Jesus' instructions and waited for the power of the Holy Spirit to come upon them. And then, they spread out, preaching – telling the story to everyone with the help and encouragement and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

They met with great opposition and persecution. But still they went and preached. They sailed the seas; they walked long distances; they slept in homes or under the stars, and sometimes, in prisons, too.

They formed Christian communities and taught them about Jesus and how to live a life of discipleship. They encouraged those new churches with letters and visits, inspiring them to continue on, even when they were being hunted down and killed.

Those early Christians – and Christians throughout history have suffered much to keep the story of God's love and forgiveness alive for all these years.

So, where *is* our place in the story? It is here. It is now. Our place is to allow the Holy Spirit to inspire and encourage and empower us to keep the message going.

In a time that has been called a “post-Christian era” we must feel an urgency to be the Church today. I am sick when I read comments that are so anti-Christian – anti-God – on social media. There are young people that have hardly set foot in a church. There are children who are growing up thinking it's not important to pray, or to read the Bible, or to have a faith family who will support them in those days ahead that will be discouraging, or even tragic.

There are people who are dying – literally, but also spiritually and emotionally who don't know where to turn; who think no one cares; who have no hope for the future; who are afraid of death.

There are people whose hearts are growing hard and whose minds, cynical because they don't know what it means to be filled with the peace of Christ; they have no idea how it feels to be comforted by the Holy Spirit.

There are people who feel alienated, outcasts, unwelcome because of who they are – of what they've done in the past; of being different in some way. They are people – human beings who need to know they are loved.

In an era where churches are declining and closing because they've lost too many members – members who, according to statistics just end up not going anywhere – we must find our place in the story.

For those of us who are committed to following Christ, we must be passionate about the command that Jesus' extended to us through his first disciples on that last day as he physically left our human world.

Go out and preach forgiveness of sin. Come to Bible study and grow in your faith and your bond with one another. Pray for the Holy Spirit to come upon you and all of us in a new and powerful way – that our eyes and heart might be opened to where God would send us; that our tongues might be loosened and our courage strengthened to tell others the great good news of God's love, forgiveness and grace. To help others come to see that church isn't just an old institution that is archaic and irrelevant today.

We have a responsibility to take our place in the history of the Christian Church and to make sure what those early disciples and martyrs accomplished never dies.

Imagine now that the Apostle Paul is writing these words for us:

<sup>15</sup>I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason <sup>16</sup>I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.

<sup>17</sup>I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, <sup>18</sup>so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, <sup>19</sup>and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power."

Pray with the eyes of your heart enlightened, dear Church, that the Holy Spirit will renew us with power and will clearly show us our place in the old, old story. Amen.

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