

# Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

May 1, 2016

## Sixth Sunday of Easter Celebration of the Ascension

Acts 1:1-11

Luke 24: 44-53

### **When Leaving is Not Really Leaving**

While we're celebrating the Ascension today, the actual Feast day is on Thursday. Because the church celebrates the Ascension 40 days after the resurrection, it always falls on a Thursday, and so we need to move it either forward or backward, to give a Sunday to it. It's important that we not skip over it, because I think we should ponder the very real fact that the resurrected Jesus is NOT still roaming the Earth.

In a few minutes, when we say the Creed, we'll chronicle the order of events from Jesus' birth through to the future "will come again to judge the living and the dead," including his ascension. As a pastor friend of mine likes to say, "How else does he get back to headquarters?"

And so Jesus rose up — up, up and away from the full of gravity, 'til a cloud took him out of the disciples' sight. Even after Jesus had disappeared, they kept gazing up toward heaven, until suddenly two men in white robes appeared and asked them, "Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?"

Now that's a silly question! Wouldn't you stand looking up toward heaven if you had seen Jesus rising up?

Just like when the women went to the tomb on Easter morning — they also met two men in dazzling clothes who asked them a silly question, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" Obviously they hadn't come to the tomb carrying embalming spices looking for someone who was alive! Clearly they had come seeking a dead Jesus.

But Jesus doesn't seem to be where he's supposed to be. He was not in the tomb, but risen and gone to Galilee. And then there's today — risen again — beyond the clouds and out of sight.

But it is interesting to note that, even though Jesus does on the surface appear to be disappearing, the disciples do not act as though this were actually true. They do not go away sad, or mourning the loss of Jesus, like they did when he died. On the contrary, in fact, they are worshiping as they return with great joy, praising God in the temple day-after-day. It's as if they do not experience Jesus as absent at all.

And we've seen this before. Remember the story (also in Luke) when the disciples on the Emmaus road, caught up in their loss and grief, do not recognize or know Jesus is with them? It is only later when Jesus breaks the bread with them that they recognize him. And in that moment, when they experience his presence most fully, he disappears from them. But rather than thinking that they missed something, instead they run back to the rest of the disciples overjoyed that Jesus is risen and still present.

And then as the disciples take up the ministry of Jesus they do some extraordinary things. They heal the sick, they raise the dead. They die forgiving those who kill them (as Stephen did) and they endure much of the same treatment as Jesus. And all along they do not take credit for any of this! Rather, they proclaim the living presence of Jesus.

It's as if Jesus' ascension is not experienced by the early disciples as his leaving or disappearing at all. While he is taken from their sight, enshrouded by clouds (like the Shekinah of Sinai in Exodus) he is not absent from them. In fact, as the newly baptized disciples gathered around the apostle's teaching, the breaking of bread, and prayer, they experienced the presence of Jesus! (Acts 2:41-42.)

Jesus does not go to be someplace else and to show up now and again capriciously. Jesus is experienced as real and present in scripture read and explained, in the table fellowship and the prayers on behalf of the world, much in the same way that Christians today experience Jesus' presence in these same actions that together mark our fellowship and communion.

The problem is that we think of heaven as another place, as there are other places in the world. It seems logical to think that if Jesus ascends to heaven, then he must go to that other place, and therefore, no longer be in this place. But that does not appear to be the case. In the Bible (Luke in particular), the Kingdom of God, what many people now assume to be heaven, is not so much a different place (located up in the sky somewhere), but rather is God's future that in Christ's death and resurrection has broken into the present.

That's completely different way of thinking about Jesus! His Kingdom is not somewhere else - out there or up there - but has come here! And "here" is not limited to the time and place of his earthly life- 2,000 years and 5,000 miles from Massachusetts. **Here** is in this place - in worship and at this table, where we experience a "foretaste of the feast to come."

But "here" is not limited to Sunday mornings from 10-11am...

The kingdom of God is like the caring attention and conversation shared around tables here (at the Spring Fair) yesterday. God's future is realized when meals and prayer shawls and flowers are delivered... Christ is still present when we make sandwiches and walk the streets of Boston... The Kingdom of Heaven is here when you look around and notice someone is missing, and then call them this afternoon... God's future is realized when Stephen Ministers pray with and for their care receivers.... Christ is present when two or three are gathered in his name to support each other as Christian parents, or when 23 middle and high schoolers meet to prepare for their mission trip... And the list goes on - you get the point...

And because we understand that God's future banquet has broken in upon our present world, we know that in God's future, healing and forgiveness and victory is certain. When we proclaim our faith in the ascended one, we are proclaiming that despite events that seem to contradict it, we can see and participate in the future Reign of God with Jesus in the here and now.

We experience, not the absence of our Lord, but his real and life transforming presence. The marvel of this is that if Jesus goes to the future ahead of us, then there is no place in our journey where Jesus is not already present to greet us.

Which means that no matter how dark the tunnels, or how frightful the destination may seem, we are not bereft of hope. When we confess that Jesus ascended into heaven, we are confessing that Jesus awaits us in very ordinary places and ordinary ways with extraordinary grace and love.

Because the future is now safely in Jesus' hands, we have more courage to face the challenges of today with hope and dignity.

There is a German Renaissance artist (15th C.) Albrecht Durer, whose primary medium was wood cuts. He would carve with intricate detail scenes from the Bible and history. There's a wonderful woodcut of Jesus' ascension.. If you look closely at the picture - not up in the clouds, but on the ground - you can see footprints on the earth. Durer has carefully outlined Jesus' footprints down on the level where the disciples are standing with their mouths open.

Maybe he was simply imagining a detail that isn't in the text. Or perhaps, he is asking us, "Why do you stand looking up into heaven?"

Because, even though Jesus is gone, you can still see where he has been:

His feet carried him where others wouldn't go,

His feet took him to tables surrounded by odd companions, where he gathered children on his lap, and questioned the disparities between the wealthy and the poor.

And as followers of Jesus - we go to the same places...

We may not see him as we picture him on the pages of Scripture, but that's okay. In fact, it may even be freeing.

We may not know where Jesus IS, so much as we know that He is WITH US.

We may not know what the future will bring, so much as we know that the future is safe in Jesus' hands.

And so, we too can return to the world after our encounter with the Risen One, rejoicing and worshiping and blessing God.

Amen.