

“DON’T JUST STAND THERE”

Matthew 28:16-20; Acts 1:1-11
May 29, 2022 – Ascension Sunday
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Ascension Day was actually four days ago, but we usually observe it on the Sunday after, since it’s pretty tough to get Presbyterians to church on a Thursday! Especially for an occasion that doesn’t seem much like, well, an *occasion*. We don’t have many ways to celebrate Ascension Day, not like some of the other special days. No legendary figure fills stockings or baskets with goodies and gifts. As far as I know, there are no special foods associated with Ascension Day. We don’t have boxes of decorations we drag out of the basement, or fun Ascension traditions that we look forward to every year. Even in church, we don’t associate Ascension Day with particular liturgical traditions like the candle-lighting or star gifts or “alleluias” of other special days. It doesn’t even have its own vibrant color, like Pentecost does. (That’s red, and it’s next Sunday, by the way!). For Ascension Sunday, we have a few hymns, and that’s about it.

But not quite knowing what to do with Ascension Day goes beyond a lack of holiday trappings or holy day rituals. It’s quite an awkward day, in that it asks us to grapple with a kind of tension in our faith, between *presence* and *absence*.

In Matthew’s conclusion to his gospel, Jesus’ parting words to his disciples are a promise: “I will be with you always.”

In Luke’s description of Jesus’ goodbye, we see those disciples staring, immobilized, at empty space, wondering where Jesus has gone and trying to understand.

Those two texts capture two very different feelings about the conclusion of Jesus post-resurrection time with his friends. Matthew’s emphasis is on what we call “the great commission” - Jesus’ charge to his followers to go into the world and make disciples and baptize. It’s a bold and exciting mission, and the tone is full of hope and energy, sustained by Jesus promise.

In his introduction to the book of Acts, Luke lets us see something else entirely – something a little more hesitant, a little less sure.

I don’t see these different perspectives as contradictory; it seems to me that we know them both.

Sometimes we feel comfort in Jesus words, “I am with you always.” Maybe when we are scared, or alone, or in unfamiliar surroundings; or when we find ourselves with unexpected responsibilities or difficult challenges. There are times, too, when we can readily say that we know Jesus is with us. We can see him in the loving smiles and gentle hands of people who

expend their time and energies caring for others. We feel the presence of Jesus when the loving support of the church family surrounds us. When we hear the call to speak out about racism or to serve as a deacon or make some changes in our life. When our prayers bring release from old resentments or the calm clarity we seek as we're making tough decisions. We know Jesus is with us, when his words – from the Sermon on the Mount, say – are always calling us back to how we want and need to live. We feel Jesus here with us when our voices lift together in a favorite hymn, or when we gather at the communion table... or as we make the promises and share the joy of baptism.

But sometimes we're looking for Jesus, wanting to see him, needing his guidance... and we sense only absence. When we don't know what to do and can't see a way out of our troubles. When someone we love needs help we can't provide. When we feel betrayed or disappointed by life. When we despair about the future of our planet or the indifference of our leaders. When our hearts are filled with sorrow and rage at the latest violent, senseless, preventable tragedy. "Where is Jesus now?" we want to know.

Ascension Day is about standing in this place where we're holding this promise of Jesus' presence but also struggling to discern that presence. Of course we could choose to go one way or the other: We could dismiss the promise as wishful-thinking nonsense and determine that we have to make our way as best we can, on our own. Or we could focus on Jesus beside us as source of peace and strength, never mind what's happening in the world around us. But that first option leaves us with more of an ethical system than a living faith. And the second runs the risk of disconnecting us from the world, from its pain and from the questions we ought to be asking. Maybe it's better – more faithful – to be in that tension, to be always wondering "where is Jesus in this situation? Where was Jesus when that was happening?" ...AND, at the same time, holding tightly to Jesus' words "I am with you always."

There's potential for paralysis here. We need the angels who ask "why are you standing there gazing up into heaven?" There is work to do, and some of it is for us. Ascension is that truth, as well. There is good news to share. There are people who need love. There are broken things to mend. There are unanswered questions. There is the constant need to be looking to see where Jesus is, and going to be there, too. This is the kind of thing he's left for his followers to do. Following Jesus was never about a personal bubble of peace and happiness. And it certainly won't do to just fall into despair when we can't sense his presence.

Perhaps we can ask, "what does that promise to be with us mean when we're wondering where Jesus is or feeling like he's absent? Does it mean Jesus' people need to go there, be his presence? Does it mean we need to move closer, listen more carefully, wait for Jesus to meet us in what seems to be absence? Does it mean that sometimes we have to trust what we can't see?"

I don't think we are supposed to read the angels' message as, "get busy, you're in charge now," any more than we should hear Jesus' promise of presence as merely personal protection and comfort. It's probably more accurate to say that the angels are telling the disciples, "the story

doesn't end here; it's just beginning. Now you'll learn to discover Jesus' presence in new ways, maybe in unexpected places. You will also learn to BE the presence of Jesus, in new places, especially in places of need or pain." It's a journey, and a lifelong one. Ascension Day marks the beginning of that journey.

In a similar way, baptism, for us marks the beginning of a journey in which we learn to discover Jesus' presence in our lives, in the church, in the world. As we share in the promises and the joy of this sacrament today, it's our hope that Ben, Natalie, and Eliza will always know that Jesus is with them... and that they will carry the love of Jesus to wherever they go. I hope we will remember our own baptismal calling to be the body, the presence of Christ in the world. And I hope we will all be reminded today that the heart of our baptismal responsibility is to help one another – and all God's children to know that Jesus is with us.

Amen.