

Luke 24:44-53 ~ Acts 1:1-11
Where is Jesus Now?
Ascension of the Lord ~ May 16, 2021
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Introduction to Scripture:

“Previously...” You know how some of your favorite shows on Netflix, Hulu, or Prime Video begin the next episode by reviewing scenes from the previous episode to remind and ready you for what you are about to watch. That’s pretty much what Luke is doing here in Acts 1:1-11, Luke’s second book begins with his “Previously.” And adds to it, readying us for what happened next, after Jesus’ ascension into heaven.

Get ready for the reappearance of the two mystery men in dazzling clothes who appeared on Easter morning at the empty tomb. These two are about to make another splashy appearance, now forty days later once again to redirect Jesus’ bewildered followers. What about us? Where are we looking for Jesus, now?

Sermon:

Wave... We all know what it is like to be left behind. To be the one waving, while the one you love drives away or just goes away. You wave goodbye as they head off to Kindergarten, or walk into their dormitory to begin their first year of college. You wave goodbye as they get in the security line at the airport. Growing up, where ever we were, my family developed a tradition we came to call “the Brubaker wave off.” This is how we do it: the people left behind, keep waving at the departing person (or persons) until they vanish from your view. Not until that moment do you turn around and go back in the house to continue your day or your life with them gone.

I think we all know what it’s like to be the one waving. The one left behind. This year, this Ascension Sunday, having come through fourteen months of pandemic loss, we are even more keenly aware of how it feels to say goodbye. Sometimes not even having the chance to wave off or see loved ones who became ill and died in the hospital. Some of us have said goodbye to jobs, careers, or career paths we had envisioned for ourselves. In a larger way, we are all in the process of waving off, of saying goodbye to life as we knew it before the pandemic. Thankfully we are starting to emerge on the other side, but we are only starting to learn what this new life will look like and feel like.

In our scripture lessons today, we witness the scene of Jesus’ final wave off. And the unwritten question in their minds. It was a confusing and uncertain time. Where is he? What is going on? What do we do, next? It was hard to know for Jesus’ disciples back then. And it can be hard for us to figure out now, too. Having ascended (the mechanics of which are unimportant) Christ was no longer limited as the human Jesus, by time and space, but released back into the cosmos as the Divine Power and presence of Love reigning over and within us all. As wonderful

as this sounds and truly is, let's be honest: sometimes everywhere can also seem like nowhere. It's just too big and broad. Where is Jesus, now? Just point me in the right direction.

So where on earth do we see Christ's resurrection power at work? Remember the sign that used to hang in offices that read, "If you don't believe in resurrection, what until 5:00 pm on Friday here in this office." Surely the prospect of a weekend after a hard week of work can offer new energy and excitement. But recognizing resurrection revives us for more than a weekend. When we see resurrections, large or small, we see the healing power of our ascended Christ at work.

A resurrection happens when an old way of seeing someone, or yourself is gone and new way, closer to the way God sees that person or you, appears. One meaning of repent is to change our minds. To expand our mind, to go beyond the mind we have. You could say, Christ expands the border of your mental earth. Christ would like to take you farther into the land of forgiveness and new way of looking at yourself and others. This may seem impossible. And it is, without being "clothed with power from on high." Unlike the magical "invisibility cloak" in Harry Potter, that gives you the cover of protection because it makes you invisible, being clothed with the Holy Spirit does the opposite. Being clothed with power from on high, i.e., the Holy Spirit: makes the super power of Christ's Divine Love visible in plain sight!

Let's admit this truth: we need that super power of the Holy Spirit to look at ourselves or a difficult situation honestly, then to repent and find our way to forgiveness. This does not happen instantly for us. Forgiveness, in my experience works more like a seed that germinates with time and love into full restoration and forgiveness. Christ summons us for this work both as individuals and as a society.

I hear Jesus calling us, as inhabitants of the USA, to go beyond wherever we are today in facing our nation's systemic and multi-generational sins of the racism that justified chattel slavery and the genocide of indigenous peoples. We know the consequences of these sins continue to play out on our streets and in the disparities that continue to cause untold and widespread suffering and injustices. The good news here, is that "clothed with power from on high," we can work toward restoration and repair, even on this scale.

Where does your known earth, end? Christ has told us in Acts 1:8. Wherever we are now, Christ would like to lead us farther into the land of repentance and forgiveness: beginning from Jerusalem (for us this means here, Marshfield), in all Judea (the wider region beyond us) and in Samaria (the people and places that may scare us or alienate us). He doesn't stop there: he said, "and to the ends of the earth."

This uncomfortable expansion, this push to extend the boundaries of our circle of compassion and concern is a thread that continues throughout the Book of Acts. Not Cornelius the Gentile, "oh yes". Not this African Eunuch, "oh, yes." Remember our text from Acts 10, last week? Peter and his cohorts were essentially saying, "Not this whole big group of Gentiles? "Oh,

yes.” It seems from the very first group of Christians who formed the first church, we have always resisted Jesus’ push to widen the circle.

Let’s take an honest inventory of our own Presbyterian history on this resistance, this pushback to Jesus’ commission here in Luke and Acts. “Now, you don’t mean Black, People of Color and White people all in the same church, do you? Holy Spirit says, “Oh yes you can and you must, if you want to follow Jesus. OK, but let’s draw the line here: we can’t ordain women to be clergy or elders. Holy Spirit says, “Oh yes you can and you must, if you want to follow Jesus. OK, but what about LGBTQ folks, do you mean we are supposed to ordain them and marry them and grant them full inclusion, too? Holy Spirit says, “Oh yes, you can and you must, if you want to follow Jesus. Look at the gospels. Look at your experience. When was Jesus *ever* about drawing boundaries and narrowing the circle of compassion and justice? The question we *should* be asking is, “Who else, what else in your creation are you calling us to open our minds and hearts to embrace and understand in new ways?”

Our lives are filled with uncertainty and change. Too many good byes, and not enough Hellos for most of us. Nothing is for sure. Whatever we think we have, or have planned can be taken away in a heartbeat. It’s the uncertainty and the not knowing which is the constant. I remember well what our Obstetrician told Bob and me in his examining room when our first baby, Emily, was already 10 days overdue. You know it’s *not* a good sign, when you come into the examining room, and your OB looks at you and says, “I can’t believe you’re still pregnant.” Of course, all we really wanted to know was: when is this baby coming? Having delivered babies for over two decades, he looked us in the eyes and told us, “Here’s what I can tell for sure: I know I don’t know.”

Perhaps another kind of resurrection happens when we no longer have the pressing need to know when, to know what’s next, to have it all dialed in and locked down. Living through all the uncertainties of the past fourteen months, we have been forced to reckon with the certainty of uncertainty. We cannot know what the future really holds. We can’t really know what tomorrow will bring. That is not the question that Jesus ever seems to answer.

Instead, the light of Jesus’ resurrection and ascension can help us ask the right question, “Where is Jesus, now?” Where do I see resurrection happening? How can I let the Holy Spirit move me to bring new hope, new life, new healing, new joy, where there was none? Sometimes the Spirit calls us to “stay here” to wait, to stay put. Other times we might get the “don’t just stand there looking, get on it!” from the Holy Spirit. A holy kick in the rear to get us in gear. The steady, consistent call is to listen and trust the Holy Spirit power, moment-by-moment to work through us.

So where have you seen Christ’s resurrection power at work, lately? The other day I was walking down the steps from our backyard to the Lake, and without even thinking about it, turned to look at this little spot of dirt where I had tried to plant a few old flower seeds last fall, in 2020. And I mean old. Bob had brought these seeds home from Germany in 2014 in this little tube, the year he was teaching there. So late last summer, way past planting season—like

August or September—just for the heck of it, I thought I'd try planting a few and see what would happen. I watered them and kept checking on them. Nothing happened. Oh well. I'm not much of a gardener. And I probably planted them wrong anyway. Then, just last week, to my utter astonishment and surprise, when I glanced at that spot, purely out of muscle memory, my heart skipped a beat. Already about 3 inches tall had emerged tiny green plants with leaves, unlike any of the Wisconsin perennials near them, and the most exquisitely dainty white flowers.

Yes, Jesus is here now. I see Christ waving to us—not a goodbye wave, but waving us to come closer, ready with resurrection power. More than enough for all of us.