

Left Behind, But Not Alone
Acts 2:6-11
Preached by Rev. Dr. Harry Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, May 16, 2010

The Apostle's Creed reaffirms the Church's core convictions about Jesus, including that remarkable declaration that reads,

*"He ascended into heaven and sitteth
on the right hand of the
Father, from thence he shall come to
judge the quick and the dead."*

The authors of the Apostle's Creed wanted to emphasize the three essential mysteries of Jesus' life and ministry: his miraculous conception and birth, his passion and resurrection and finally his ascension into heaven.

You've heard countless Christmas, Good Friday and Easter sermons, but I doubt you've heard too many on his ascension, or return to his heavenly throne where he resumed co-reigning with God the Father.

It sometimes seems Easter is the end of the story and anything that happened after that is anti climatic. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John seem to reinforce this misconception by giving very little, if any, space to the Ascension. Matthew reports Jesus' parting instructions to the disciples on a mountain top, but says nothing of his being lifted up into the clouds. Mark covers it in just one verse, John says absolutely nothing. Luke on the other hand, tells the story twice, the reading you just heard plus another short version in his Gospel.

Why is that? Is the Ascension, at best, an after thought on Christ's life and ministry? Or, was it intentional, that is, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John didn't build up the story because they were convinced Jesus would return in glory to establish his Kingdom, within their lifetimes, at any given moment, therefore no extensive commentary was really necessary.

Whatever the reason, Christ's ascension into heaven has real implications, starting with this: he left the disciples behind entrusting them with the responsibility of spreading the gospel throughout the world.

There's a non-biblical story about Jesus talking to Michael the Archangel soon after he returned to heaven. Michael said, "Lord, it's good to have you back, but what's going to happen next on earth, how will your gospel spread with you up here?"

Jesus replied, "I gave that job to my disciples."

Michael was incredulous. “Those knuckleheads? They let you down so many times! That makes you think they’ll do it right this time? You better have a Plan B!”

Jesus looked at him, smiled and said, “Michael, there is no Plan B.”

Luke reports just before he was lifted up Jesus said his parting words to them, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all of Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.”

First Jesus made the promise, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you.” Next Sunday the Church celebrates the Feast of Pentecost, when the Apostles, gathered in the Upper Room, were suddenly enveloped by the power of the Holy Spirit. Slightly more than forty days earlier, Jesus already told the disciples, after he was gone the Holy Spirit, would come to teach and remind them everything he taught them. But at his ascension Jesus now told them the Spirit would empower them.

The Greek word for power, *dunamis*, from which we get the English words *dynamic* and *dynamo*, means an energetic strength and ability for dynamic living, a power far beyond us and yet dwelling within us, the power enabling us to be and do our best as God’s children and Christ’s disciples.

We’ll talk more about the empowering of the Holy Spirit next week. For now, let’s concentrate on Jesus’ final instructions to his disciples. First, “...and you will be my witnesses...”

I looked up the word “witness” in the dictionary:

- someone who sees an event and reports what happened
- a spectator, a close observer
- a person who testifies under oath in a court
- of law
- one who has personal knowledge of something.

Jesus said, “...and you will be MY witnesses...” Jesus charged his disciples to be his advocates, telling anyone who’d listen about their personal experiences with Jesus, what he taught them, what they saw him do, whatever they heard him say, nothing more, nothing less, just speak the Truth and tell how that Truth transformed their lives.

I’ve told you before how St. Patrick’s disciples evangelized the people of Ireland. These early Christian missionaries would move into a village and be a Christ-like presence, helping their new neighbors thatch their roofs and bring in the crops also visiting the sick and comforting those in distress. Their strategy was simple, be good neighbors and earn people’s trust so when someone finally

asked them, “Why are you so helpful and caring?” they’d answer, “You really want to know?” and then be credible witnesses, testifying to the Truth they experienced through Christ. Within a generation, all of Ireland became thoroughly and genuinely Christian. We can learn a lot from those early Irish missionaries.

Let’s now do a quick recap of Jesus’ final words before his ascension:

- 1) He promised his disciples they’d soon be empowered by the Holy Spirit to live dynamic Christ-like lives.
- 2) He charged them to be his witnesses to tell anyone who’d listen about their personal experiences with Jesus.

After making his promise to empower them and then instructing them to be truthful witnesses, Jesus laid out a straight forward strategy to spread his gospel: start where they were, and then move out, “...and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.” Like expanding concentric circles, the Gospel would be lived and preached until it spread across the face of the earth.

Just ten days later it started with a gust of wind as the Holy Spirit drove them into the Jerusalem streets where Peter preached and thousands believed and were baptized. From there these newly energized apostles retraced Jesus’ footsteps, going back into the Judean countryside, revisiting the people and reassuring them Jesus and his Gospel were as alive as before his crucifixion. And then, as we learned several weeks ago from the controversial story of the baptism of the first Gentiles, Peter took the Jesus Movement beyond the confines of Judea to all the peoples of the earth. And, as they say, the rest is history.

But you’re not here for a history lesson, you want to know what, if any, impact the Ascension should have on your faith and practice. But first, let’s deal with one of your unspoken questions dealing with the ascension itself. I don’t think we should see the ascension from a strictly literal point of view and realize there’s a deeper spiritual meaning to what is written. Remember, Christ’s crucifixion, resurrection and ascension is shrouded in the unfathomable mystery of God and Luke, in the best language he could, tried to describe the indescribable, the Risen Christ’s miraculous return to his heavenly throne and entrusting his disciples, and now us, with the awesome responsibility of living and spreading his Gospel as we are empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Before his ascension, especially before the crucifixion, Jesus had one body confined to our time and space, only reaching the people he could see, hear and touch, but now his risen and ascended presence permeates the universe as he rules the creation with truth and grace.

That’s why I chose the sermon’s title, “Left Behind But Not Alone.” We are left behind trusting Christ is with us to carry on his ministry of reconciliation, by

being faithful witnesses who teach, love and heal in the name of Jesus, as we go beyond our comfort zones and out into the world being the Body of Christ, his eyes and ears, his heart and mind, his hands and feet continuing in his name the ministry he began 2,000 years ago.

Christ looked at Michael the Archangel, smiled and said, "There is no Plan B."

Let's live up to his trust and spread his gospel in our Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria and then to the ends of the earth.