

May 24, 2020

Ascension Sunday

Acts 1: 1-11

Prayer: Dear Lord, We welcome you into this service as we commemorate Ascension Sunday, the day you ascended into heaven to unite God the Father, Jesus the Son. Please help us to determine what those of left behind are to do. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Gazing Toward Heaven

In April, I got a phone call from a cousin who lives in another city. He asked if I thought the coronavirus was a signal of the end times.

I said no. But I don't think there has been a generation on earth who has not imagined that it was facing the end times.

About the time Mark was writing our first gospel, an ultra-strict sect of the Jews called the Essenes made a declaration: The world was ending. They saw the Jewish revolt against Rome in the years 66 through 70 as the end-time battle.

Jerusalem did fall. But the world went on.

In the year 365, church leader Hilary of Poitiers said, *This is the year Christ will return, and the world we know will end.*

Even the pope thought the end was surely coming on January 1, 1000. But no.

Year after year after year, failures have never halted Judgment Day predictions. *The world is ending. Jesus is coming. Jesus is coming.*

In the modern era, some predictions got a lot of press, like astrologer Jeane Dixon in 1962. Cult leader Jim Jones in 1967. Evangelist Pat Robertson in 1982 and 2007. Harold Camping in 1994, 1995 and just about every month of 2011.

There were so many predictions for January 1, 2000 – plus Y2K worries -- that every journalist on a payroll had to work that New Year's Eve, just in case.

The Mayan apocalypse was predicted for December 2012. And there are predictions that stretch into the future: When the world failed

to end in 1962, Jeane Dixon cleverly made her next prediction for 2020 – when she would be dead and wouldn't have to hear about it.

Even Jesus was asked about the end time. Here's his response in the gospels of Mark and Matthew: **“About that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”** (Mark 13: 32, Mt. 24: 36)

It seems to me to take a certain amount of hubris to say, *Well, Jesus may not know, but I know.*

Our Scripture passage for today gives us some sense of our place in Christian time and history. It is the opening of the book of Acts.

Part 1 of Luke's story was his gospel, in which Jesus lived and taught and healed, was crucified, buried and resurrected.

Now we're at Part 2. Let's read what happened next: **Acts 1: 1-11**

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning ²until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving

instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.

³After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over the course of forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. ⁴While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. 'This', he said, 'is what you have heard from me; ⁵for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.'

⁶ So when they had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?'

⁷He replied, 'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'

⁹When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

¹⁰While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them.

¹¹They said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.'

We've talked in here a good bit about Jesus's post-resurrection appearances, when he showed his scars, broke bread, cooked fish, invited the disciples to touch him. Now it's time for him to return to the Father and for the Holy Spirit to replace him on earth.

During this very last conversation between Jesus and his disciples, they asked their version of the question that people have asked at every Judgment Day prediction: **“Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”**

In ancient times, that's what the Jews were looking for – a Messiah to restore Israel to its glory days. And just as he did when he was the

earthly Jesus, the resurrected Jesus told them it was not for them to know.

“It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.”

In other words, the ending of history was not what they were to focus on. It was not what they were to worry about. It was not what the Christian church was to concern itself with.

And then Jesus spoke his last words about what his friends *were* to focus on, worry about, concern themselves with. Which is what *we* are to focus on, worry about, concern ourselves with.

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Sure enough, the Holy Spirit would come 10 days later, at Pentecost. But the instructions, the command, the job of the new Christians was given right here -- to witness to the ends of the earth.

You know, we give great weight to someone's last words. In a murder mystery, the detective always wants to know the victim's last words because presumably they could point to the murderer.

A Last Will and Testament records our last wishes about who gets our stuff.

We assume that someone's "last words" are the most important thing they want us to remember. And the most important thing Jesus wanted us to remember was two-fold: *The Holy Spirit will join you. And you will be my witnesses....*

The moment these words were spoken, Jesus was taken up into a cloud. That's what we mean when we mark Ascension Day, which was actually Thursday, or 40 days after Easter.

Understandably, the awestruck disciples watched this remarkable event – probably with wide eyes and open mouths. As Luke puts it, they **“were gazing toward heaven.”**

And they received a heavenly rebuke. **“Suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?’ ”**

Even as Jesus was ascending, and they were watching – which strikes me as a pretty natural thing to do – the disciples were chastised for **“looking up toward heaven.”** Because – bam!— they were not supposed to be worried about heaven and when and where. They were supposed to be focused on witnessing. Just like that.

Just like that, their job had changed. They had spent 40 days listening to Jesus’ final instructions, and – bam! – it was time to get to work.

Men of Galilee, why are you looking toward heaven? I love that.

That time in their lives was finished. In 10 days, at Pentecost, they would receive the Holy Spirit and enter a time of witnessing to the ends of the earth. Which is the story that Acts tells.

Jesus will come again, the angels in white robes assured them. But his coming was beyond their control. They were to take control of the things they could control. Being obedient to the Holy Spirit. And witnessing to their time with Jesus.

I guess this is what has been hardest for us at Triune during this pandemic -- the loss of control. Just three months ago, what was right and wrong was so much clearer. Now it's murky.

In the case of the disciples, these two robed figures essentially accused them of worrying too much about things beyond their control. Of having too much "heaven on their minds." We can do that, too.

We can get so caught up in gazing toward heaven, of our personal salvation, that we neglect to live as Christians here on earth.

We had a visiting church here one time for dinner. I sat at a table with three of their men. And during the entire meal, they grilled me about how many professions of faith we had, how many baptisms.

They told me about mission trips they'd taken and recited the professions of faith like they were baseball statistics. I had the distinct impression they'd taken their enthusiasm for football or NASCAR or whatever and simply transferred it to a scorecard for souls.

There was no appreciation for living in community, for discipleship, for the hard and messy process of living together as followers of Christ. Only *How many souls did you save? How many people did you baptize? How many gold stars in your crown?*

We can see where this attitude comes from: Jesus' command in this very passage to be his witnesses. But there is more to true witness than preaching the gospel, counting those who come forward and then tallying the score.

There is living together as brothers and sisters. As our world grows increasingly unequal, the establishment of community becomes increasingly critical.

Men of Galilee, men of Greenville, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?

We are facing a critical time here on earth and here on the corner of Rutherford and Stone. I was on a Zoom call this week with the South Carolina Department of Employment and Workforce. And if those folks weren't looking toward the end of the world, exactly, they *were* looking toward an extended rocky time for our citizens.

In the 11 months leading up to March, our state's unemployment rate was something like 2.6 to 2.9 percent. Those with barriers such as prison records, addiction, spotty work histories, and mental and physical limitations were competing only against others with similar barriers.

That won't be the case in coming months. One survey showed that the state's employers do not expect to call *nearly* all their employees back. So workers with barriers, and the 9,000 high school grads not heading to college or into the military, will be competing with highly skilled workers.

At Triune, we know what that looks like. In the recession of 2008 and 2009, the demand in our food pantry went from a steady 30 boxes a week to 80. And we were still turning people away.

We served a lot of people who quietly told us, “I’ve never had to ask for help before.”

It’s discouraging when you think you’ve made progress in an area, and it’s time to go on to the next level, and then you are shoved backward, as if a tidal wave knocked you off your feet. This pandemic has knocked all of us off our careful plans, our lofty goals.

I heard myself say recently, “I’m afraid of disappointing Jesus.” More likely, I’m afraid of losing my own vision of what Triune should be.

I fear that when this temporary flood of unemployment and stimulus money ends, there are now going to be more hurting people, more unemployed people, more desperate people.

So we can't waste our time gazing toward heaven. *Isn't living as Christ lived as important as preaching salvation?*

We ought to understand this even better than the first Christians. The angels promised them, **“This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”**

Understandably, they thought that meant soon. Very soon.

Looking back over two millennia, we have even more reason to take Jesus at his word that no one knows when he will return.

When he made that comment in the gospels of Mark and Matthew, both writers used it as an occasion to warn that since we don't know, we should live as if he could come back at any moment.

If he came back right now, what would you want Jesus to find you doing?

Crowing about the souls you've saved?

Or quietly tending the hungry, the disabled, the broken, the abandoned, the newly unemployed, the frightened?

Men of Galilee, men of Greenville, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?

There is so much Jesus would have us look at right here.

Amen.