“Again and Again”

Acts 1: 6-11

The Rev. Emily Krause Corzine
Associate Minister

May 17, 2015

From the Pulpit
The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215
Phone: 614.228.1741 • Fax: 614.461.1741
Email: home@first-church.org
Website: http://www.first-church.org
Prayer for Illumination: Open our hearts and minds O God, by the power of your Holy Spirit, that as the scriptures are read and your word proclaimed we may hear with Joy what you have for us this day. AMEN.

If you blinked this past Thursday, you might have missed the important feast day of Ascension. So today we celebrate Ascension. Maybe you picked up a Facebook post or a saw a “tweet” about it, but in all honesty…I might have missed it too, had I not been preaching this Sunday. The text from the book of Acts that Melissa read a few moments ago shares a little bit about what happened after Jesus’ Ascension…but what is fascinating is the Ascension text itself. You’ll find it at the very beginning of the Acts of the Apostles, the second book attributed to the Gospel write Luke. It’s describes the strange and mysterious acts that happened centuries ago. Here are the words from Acts 1: 6-11:

So when the disciples had come together, they asked Jesus, ‘Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?’ He replied, ‘It is not for you to know the times or periods that the God has set by God’s own authority. But 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.’ When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They 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.’ (Acts 1: 6-11)

A friend of mine used to love soap operas. Before the days of DVR, she would sometimes schedule her classes so she could be back in time for her soap. When I asked her what she loved about soap operas, she said, “their complete disregard for the rules of logic and consistency.” In her all-time favorite soap, All My Children, the Martin family had a son named Bobby. On one now famous episode, Bobby went upstairs to look for his skis. He was never seen again, never referred to again. There was no need to kill him off, or have him move out of town. The writers just sent him upstairs to look for his skis.

I had a conversation with a young adult a few years ago. She wanted to know what happened to Jesus after the Resurrection. She knew he died and was raised then made
several appearances back on earth, but then what? Did he open up a coffee shop in Nazareth? Did he get up and move to Florida? I added my recollection of my friend’s soap experiences, maybe Jesus just went upstairs to look for his skis?¹

Some forty days after Easter we have this strange story of how Jesus ascended into the air. We have several perfectly good accounts of what happened to the risen Jesus. The Seventh Sunday of Easter, the Sunday before Pentecost, is the time set aside to hear these stories. On this Ascension Sunday we celebrate that Jesus ascended to heaven and became Lord of the whole universe and poured out his good gifts on the entire world. That sounds like a pretty important thing to celebrate. Ascension Day is a very important day in the life of the church, but it has fallen out of fashion.

What are we exactly celebrating? What exactly happened on that first Ascension Day? According to Luke, Jesus withdrew from the disciples and was carried up into heaven. It has always been the claim of the church that, after resurrection, Jesus went to God and entered God’s reality. It all sounds a little mysterious. Maybe more than a little mysterious.

¹ Sermon illustration from Amy Miracle, Broad Street Presbyterian Church.
Can you imagine his disciples after Jesus ascended? I can imagine the disciples standing there looking up at the sky for a long time. Did they have smiles on their faces? Did they wave good bye? Then slowly the realization hits. Jesus was gone, really gone. What were they to do then?

If that is the case, you might say Ascension Day doesn’t feel like much to celebrate. It feels like the day after the party. It’s the day after visiting family packs up and drives away. It’s the day to wash the sheets and put away the special dishes. It’s the day to walk back to Jerusalem.² Dejected. Lost. Alone.

So what are we celebrating again? We are celebrating being left behind. We mark the day that Jesus left this world. No wonder Ascension Day doesn’t make it in the greeting card business.

There were no Hallmark cards this year that said, “Thinking of you … you were left behind too!” “Jesus is really gone… Happy Ascension Day!” Those seem like pretty confusing, if not, depressing greeting cards.

---

² Bradley Schmeling, Christian Century, May 28, 2014
When Ascension Day fell on Mother’s Day two years ago, a colleague jumped at the chance to celebrate the alternative—and make a Big Deal out of Ascension. She asked the congregation to greet one another with Happy Ascension Day, instead of Happy Mother’s Day! She suggested, sharing this perhaps wordy greeting, “May you have a most blessed and most joy filled celebration of this most holy of feast days.” That may be a little much.

After Easter, for days, Jesus kept appearing and disappearing and reappearing. I can imagine that Jesus’ refusal to remain dead, while glorious, was also a little exhausting for the disciples. Maybe a few were relieved when Jesus ascended? Who knows? Maybe others felt differently.

I love the web post from author and lectionary blogger, Rachel Held Evans, who wrote this about Ascension, “Jesus, what’s up with this floating thing? After all the eating and drinking and healing and laughing and crying, it just doesn’t seem like your style—floating. I like you better with your feet on the ground.”³ Maybe we want him to keep his feet on the ground, too.

³ www.rachelheldevans.com/blog
But that can’t be the way this story goes. In order for God’s work to come to fruition in the world, Jesus has to exit this earthly stage. With a shepherd’s crook or a trap door, or a kind of Peter Pan exit (with harness and pulley) that leaves the others standing on stage in amazement…Jesus has to leave the stage. Jesus has to leave in order for the ongoing ministry of the disciples and centuries later, the church, to continue.

For some, it might seem like Jesus left too soon. The disciples weren’t ready yet. Leaving before they were trained and educated and practiced/rehearsed. You know, well trained disciples going out to witness in the land and making disciples of all nations, certainly would be more effective than mere novices. But Jesus insists on using people before they think they are ready--Before we think we are ready.

Not to worry. Jesus left instructions. It would be like Jesus to leave instructions, wouldn’t it? He left assignments. Marching orders. Jesus’ instructions weren’t long, but they were comprehensive. In the Gospel of Matthew, he told the disciples, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations…” In the Acts of the Apostles, Jesus’ words were no
less expansive. “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

That is an impossible assignment. We need Jesus’ help to do it. We need Jesus-sandals on the ground-to help. And where is Jesus? Where is Jesus? He is nowhere to be found.

Jesus left instructions as to who was to be invited to join his followers. He left definitive guidance on who was to be included and who was to be left out. Those instructions were very simple and they were easy to remember. Everyone is invited. No one is excluded. He said, “Go, and make disciples of ALL nations.” That means everyone.

Until this day, it seems the story about Jesus was very small. It was Jesus and his disciples. It was Jesus, his family, his disciples and others who had followed closely, but it was still small. The story was small…but today…the moment that Jesus left was the moment that the scope of his ministry dramatically expanded.

Ascension is the day Jesus ministry got big. It was as if he had not ascended but exploded out into the world. All of the sudden, there were no boundaries. Jesus was nowhere. Jesus was everywhere.
We celebrate the Ascension again and again because we’re no different from the early church who gathered around this story from the beginning to hear what they needed: that they would receive power from the Holy Spirit which God was sending them in order for them to go out into the world. And perhaps even today we are reminded that we have no power of our own and never have.

There the disciples were, a fragile little community, anxious and bewildered, watching their Lord leave them, but they aren’t distraught and sad. When it's all over, as Luke tells us, the disciples returned to Jerusalem, not sad and alone…but worshipping with great joy.  

Because disciples continued the ministry that Jesus began, we too, can join in the ministry and mission right here on the corner of Broad and 9th, in this place and in this city, at this time for the work God is calling us to do. We continue God’s mission that is set before us, constantly praying and discerning what God has in store for us, and who God is calling us to be.

“Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” That’s what the angels asked the disciples. The disciples are

---

4 Day 1.org Rev. Katherine Taylor, Blacksburg, VA FPC
standing there with their mouths hanging open, gazing into an empty sky and the angels ask, “Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” Interesting isn’t it that the angels are the ones who call us back to earth. Hey, stop looking up to heaven. Get your mind and heart and feet back on earth.

But like the disciples, we have to stop gazing up toward heaven and keep moving. “We might want to stop standing here staring at the bottoms of Jesus’ feet, and get to work—feeding, fellowshipping, healing, teaching, loving, hosting, sharing, breaking bread and pouring wine.”

Can you imagine if the disciples had spent the rest of their days gazing heavenward – remembering the good old days when Jesus walked the earth, looking forward to the good old days when Jesus would return? Can you imagine it? There would be no church, no communion of saints, and no living breathing tradition of faith.

So today, it’s a mysterious and glorious day in the life of the God’s story for Jesus, the disciples and the church. Today we celebrate that Jesus got big. It’s a celebration we need to have again and again.

---

5 www.rachelheldevans.com/blog
But come back next Sunday. It’s another celebration in the life of the church. It’s Pentecost, the birth of the living and breathing church in the world. You won’t want to miss it.

Happy Ascension Day!

Amen.

Copyright 2015, First Congregational Church, UCC