

“Proclaim to All Nations”

Luke 24:44-53

Sunday, June 5, 2011

The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

William A. Ritter writes:

“A man was being tailgated by a stressed-out woman on a busy street. Suddenly the light turned yellow. And though he could have run it, he chose not to. The tailgating woman -- who was all set to run it with him -- missed his rear end by a matter of inches. Screeching to a stop, she jerked forward in her seat. Figuratively, she hit the roof. Literally, she hit the horn. Rolling down the window, she screamed and gestured (loudly and obscenely) until an officer approached her in mid-rant and had the gall to ask for her license and registration.

“When he returned, she had calmed enough to inquire as to why she -- rather than the stupid jerk in front of her -- was under suspicion. ‘Well,’ said the officer, ‘when I pulled up behind you blowing your horn and screaming, I paused to read your bumper stickers.’

“‘God loves you and so do I.’

“‘Honk if you love Jesus.’

“‘My boss is a Jewish carpenter.’

“‘Then I saw the chrome-plated fish emblem on your trunk. So you can understand why I assumed you had stolen the car.’

Ritter continues, “When I heard that story, my initial response was an arm-pumping ‘Yes.’ Until I remembered that she, too, is my sister in Christ.”

I would add that any one of us is in danger, at any time, of being a negative messenger for Christ, just like the woman in the story. Jesus says, “repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations.”

He says this to the disciples just before his ascension into heaven.

I. Understanding the Ascension

The church today has two tasks in understanding the Ascension.

One is to realize that the biblical story of the Ascension tries to do the impossible -- to describe Jesus’ departure in terms of time and space.

Even in Jesus’ own time people do not fully understand this event or the stories that seek to describe it. Whatever the disciples witness at Jesus’ Ascension is beyond the power of words to express.

A second task of the Church in understanding the Ascension is to discern what message the Ascension carries beyond time and space.

The short answer is this: the Ascension makes every person a contemporary of Christ. We can all know Him personally through the Holy Spirit. There are no second-hand disciples. Writes David Canada in his book, Jesus' Prayer for You:

“There was a tavern near a college campus, and it was a favorite hangout for many of the students. As Parents' Weekend approached, they posted a sign that said, ‘Bring your parents to lunch. We'll pretend we don't know you.’

“One of the local churches countered with a signboard that read, ‘Bring your parents to church. We'll pretend we do know you.’

Because of the Ascension, we can know Jesus, no matter what our time or place in history. Of course, it’s our choice whether or not we come to know Jesus.

II. Beyond Time and Space

Soren Kierkegaard says that every person can be contemporary with the age in which they live – and with one more thing – Christ’s life on earth.

Through his Ascension, Jesus accompanies each generation, the story of his life becoming the eternal history by which we can best understand our own histories.

David Scaer gives us a reminder in his article, “Jesus Did Not Leave – He Reigns Through Us.” Scaer writes that the Ascension is a time of great joy for the disciples. They are not saddened by Jesus’ departure. They may not know the science we know today, but on some level they know that Jesus is entering a new dimension beyond time and space. Furthermore – and perhaps more importantly – they know that he is preparing the way for them to participate in his reign. His work of preaching the gospel, of calling people to repentance, is now to be carried on by them.

Where Jesus goes when he departs is a mystery if we think in concrete terms of time and space. He does not enter a fixed time or a specific location. He transcends his historic particularity of maleness and Jewishness and “first century-ness.”

We do not have words to describe what happens to him. We only know that because of the Ascension we are now able to participate in Jesus’ ministry more fully.

III. Full Partners With Christ

Next week, as we celebrate Pentecost, we will remember the power of the Holy Spirit which Jesus sends to help us.

Today we hear him promising to send this helper. And we hear him commanding that we preach his gospel to all nations, to all peoples, to all races, to all the people of the earth.

By interpreting the scriptures to the disciples, Jesus shows his continuity with the history and faith of Israel.

By commanding the disciples to preach to all nations, Jesus demonstrates God's universal offer of repentance and forgiveness of sins to all who will receive it.

By commanding the disciples to stay in Jerusalem until they receive "power from on high," Jesus establishes Jerusalem as the center of the early Christian mission.

Finally, after Jesus blesses them and leaves, the disciples follow his instructions and wait in Jerusalem for the coming of the Holy Spirit. Their waiting is filled with joy and praise and constant prayer.

Isaac Asimov tells a hilarious story about a Rabbi Feldman who was having trouble with his congregation; they couldn't agree on anything. The president of the congregation said, "Rabbi, this can't continue. There has to be a conference, and we have to settle all areas of dispute once and for all." The rabbi agreed.

At the appointed time the rabbi, the president, and ten elders met around a magnificent mahogany table in the conference room of the synagogue. One by one the issues were dealt with and on each issue, it became more and more apparent that the rabbi was a lonely voice in the wilderness. The president of the synagogue said, "Come, Rabbi, enough of this. Let's vote and allow the majority to rule." He passed out slips of paper and each man made his mark. The votes were collected and the president said, "You may examine them, Rabbi. It is eleven to one against you. We have the majority."

Offended, the rabbi rose to his feet and said, "So, now you think because of the vote that you're right and I'm wrong. Well, that's not so. I stand here," and he raised his arms

impressively while looking heavenward, “and call upon the Holy One of Israel to give us a sign that I'm right and you're wrong.”

No sooner were the words out of his mouth when there was a deafening clap of thunder and a brilliant flash of lightning that struck the mahogany table and cracked it in two. The room was filled with smoke and fumes, and the president and the elders were hurled to the floor. Surrounded by rubble the rabbi stood erect and untouched, his eyes and smile flashing with triumph. Slowly, the president lifted himself out of the rubble. His hair was singed, his glasses were hanging from one ear, his clothing was in disarray. Finally he said, “All right, eleven to two. But we still have the majority.”

Right and wrong does not rest with the majority but with the Authority who is Christ. He is the One whom God has given authority over all people. It is His truth that we are called to proclaim to the nations.

Closing.

The joy of the disciples at the Ascension is the joy of anticipation. Within a short time they will become full partners in Christ's mission. I close with this familiar advice from Robert Fulghum about how we can learn – from kindergarteners! – the important lessons we need to learn in order to be the best partners with Jesus that we can be:

“Most of what I really need to know about how to live, and what to be, I learned in kindergarten. Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate school mountain, but there in the sandbox at nursery school.

“These are the things I learned: Share everything. Play fair. Don't hit people. Put things back where you found them. Clean up your own mess. Don't take things that aren't yours. Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody...

“Take a nap every afternoon. When you go out into the world, watch for traffic, hold hands and stick together. Be aware of wonder. Remember the little seed in the plastic cup. The roots go down and the plant goes up and nobody really knows how or why, but we are all like that...

“Think of what a better world it would be if we all -- the whole world -- had cookies and milk about 3 o'clock every afternoon and then lay down with our blankets for a nap. Or if we had a basic policy in our nation and other nations to always put things back where we found them and cleaned up our own messes. And it is still true, no matter how old you are, when you go out into the world, it is best to hold hands and stick together.”

The God of the Ascension is not bound by time and space. And yet he knows us and cares about us, living as we are within time and space.

Jesus knows, when he sends us out to proclaim his word to the nations, that we will need each other's support. And so he tells us to stick together, and to seek the power of the Holy Spirit. We can't do it alone; but together, we can do all things, in His name, and in the power of His Spirit.

May you experience His boundless touch on your life this morning, as we gather together at His table.

Amen.