

Acts 1:6-14 Pastor Bill Uetricht 6/05/11 7 Easter

Well, I heard that Travis indicated that my absence from you all the last two Sundays could possibly be explained by the theory that I had been “raptured up.” I am here to announce that he was wrong. I, like you, was “left behind.” And I am happy to report that that is precisely where you and I are to meant to be, especially if we take seriously the witness of Luke in part two of his book—a part known as the Book of Acts. For Luke, life for Christians is about the ends of the earth, not the end of the world.

Today’s first lesson from Acts takes us in many ways to a weird place, weird at least for us modern types. The story is of Jesus’ ascension, an event that seems very foreign to us rational, scientific folks. In Luke’s first book—Luke--Jesus had died, had been raised from the dead, and had appeared to some disciples. And now in Act Two—the book of Acts--the resurrected Christ is talking to the apostles about what his resurrection means. “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” the apostles ask, playing as Pastor Danielle Schroyer describes it, the role of the young children in the car who are constantly wondering, “Are we there yet?”

The hopes and the dreams of the apostles had been dashed when Jesus was crucified. They had thought that maybe this Jesus movement would have done away with their oppressors, the Romans, and would have ushered in the day of prosperity and hope for all, especially for the poor. And then Jesus died. Dreams were killed. But now Jesus is alive. Can the hope of the return to the glory days be renewed? The resurrected Christ responds by more or less saying, who knows for sure? We don’t. Only God knows. Nonetheless, you’ve got some work to do. You will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth. And then,

with a splash of Hollywood wonder, Jesus is lifted up into the heavens. And we modern types, go, “Ya, right!”

Danielle Schroyer admits that this is a wildly irrational text and pokes fun at it when she highlights the portion of the story in which the two heavenly beings in white robes show up and chastise the apostles for staring at Jesus floating upward. Their staring is the least crazy thing going on. If you saw someone flying toward heaven, you yourself would without a doubt stare. You don’t have to be preoccupied with Steven Spielberg type effects to find yourself a little amazed by someone who is flying without the assistance of an airplane.

But before we get all wrapped up in our twenty-first century rationalistic reactions, let me suggest that the story of the ascension, I suspect, represents the early church’s struggle with what to do about Jesus’ absence from their lives and ministry. Schroyer calls the ascension the “great day of honesty.” This is a day when we and the disciples admit that Jesus isn’t here and we all wish he were because most of the time we don’t know what we are doing.

Many of us can relate to wishing someone were here. Many of us know the power of grief. Life could be different if that person we so treasure could be here. That one who supported us, that one who strengthened us, that one who rooted for us, that one who gave us direction and identity—if only that one could be here. For you see, we don’t always feel so competent. We don’t always feel so secure. We don’t always feel like we know what we are doing. How do we handle life therefore? How can we go forward?

I suspect that this was the very thing the apostles and the early church were struggling with. The story of the ascension meets them in that struggle and suggests that Jesus is not removed from them. He is

not absent from them. Rather, he has gone ahead of them. The faith community, and we see this big time in the Gospel of John today, sees Jesus as going to and being with God. And being with God means that Jesus is never fully removed from them, but is instead, out in front of them. Their job, our job, then, is to head in the direction where he is. He is out in front of us in the future. Our task is to head into the future. The future is uncertain. The future is scary, but it is where God is. Therefore, move in that direction; put one put in front of the other and head there. And do so knowing that you are accompanied, that you are empowered by the very energy of God, by what the church calls the Holy Spirit.

You finish high school and head toward what's next, you complete a college degree and wonder what is in store for you, you head toward the end of your life and face the big reality of death, you leave behind one relationship and enter into a new one, you lose a spouse, a friend, a way of living and try to figure out what's next—you do all of these things accompanied. You do all of them in light of one who has gone ahead of you. You go into the future in light of the future-making God.

And what's more, you go into the future with a task. You've got something to do. You've got a mission. You are a part of the mission we all share together. And this mission is not focused on how we escape this life, how we get out of this world. People of Muskegon, why do you stand looking toward heaven? Jesus is focusing your attention on the ends of the earth. As you walk forward into the future, your task, your mission, is centered on this place, this world, on this world's people. Our God is fundamentally loving of and compassionate toward this world. Your task as you go into the future is to take love and compassion to the ends of the earth. Life in the future

for you will be about love and compassion. It won't be about making more money than other people, establishing more status than others, grabbing more power than others, asserting your greater intelligence or superior political or religious ideology over others. No, it will be about love that is meant to be spread to the ends of the earth, a love that includes all people and the entirety of creation. You've got a big job. You are to be witnesses of love and compassion to everyone and everything.

As you are such witnesses, make sure that you realize that the one who has gone ahead of you, the one who has prepared a future for you is also praying for you. Hear his prayer! He is speaking to God about us. Listen to his words: "I am asking on their behalf [**our** behalf]. I am asking on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine." Wow! As we go into the future, as we are about our mission of loving the world, we live in light of a great intimacy with the God who prepares the future and gives us our task. We belong to him and to the one whom he has sent, Jesus. This one remembers us and speaks to God on our behalf. And his primary concern for us is that we know that intimacy and that we share it with other. "Protect them," he says, "so that they may be one, as we are one." There is a great intimacy between the father and the son. He wants that intimacy for us. He wants us not to agree about everything, not to look at all issues in the same way, not to talk the same language, appear the same, but rather wants us to be united in purpose, one in mission, undivided in our love for each other and the world.

Oh, it's great to be left behind! It's amazing to walk into the future, trusting the one who loves us and has paved the way for us, joining together with others in sharing that love for the world. What

could be a better deal than to be left behind to live out God's love for everything and everybody and to be a part of that amazing mission with a bunch of friends!