

Ascension Sunday

May 16, 2010

Ephesians 1:15-21

Acts 1: 1-11

A number of years ago I took a road trip with my longtime friend, Stephanie. One morning as we drove along we found ourselves talking about the Ascension of Jesus. Stephanie had just read a book about what might have happened to Jesus after the Resurrection. The author wrote that he believed Jesus had headed off to some caves in the Gobi desert, where He lived as a hermit for the rest of his earthly life. Stephanie said that she really liked this idea. I erupted against it, saying something like “Do you really believe that Jesus would just walk off and abandon his friends and live comfortably in a cave while they were being persecuted and put to death by the Romans? I don’t believe it for one minute!” “Well” countered Stephanie, “What do you think happened to Jesus? Surely you don’t take Luke’s description in Acts literally? Do you really believe that Jesus just opened his arms and was lifted up and that a cloud took him out of sight?!”

The story of the Ascension is a challenging story for us. Of the five major events in Jesus’ life that we celebrate every year: Christmas, Good Friday, Easter Sunday, the Ascension and Pentecost, it is the one event that we know the least about. And it’s not just because there aren’t a lot of “Happy Ascension Day” cards put out by Hallmark! It’s also because most preachers are challenged by the details of the story and will often happily slip right over it. We go, in our preaching, from the celebration of Easter to the celebration of Pentecost. I remember once being at the Queensway Cathedral in Toronto. I had gone to watch a play they were putting on called “The Life of Jesus”. I can still see, at the end of the play, the character of Jesus being raised up on pulleys amid clouds of dry ice and the crash of cymbals and the sound of trumpets and the swell of violins. It was too much. This image of Jesus ascending: of rising into the heavens like some kind of cosmic superman, was too much. Sometimes, the details of a particular story are too much for us to process. But then, I believe that the truth of a particular Bible story is rarely found in the details. The truth, rather, is found in what God is saying to us through the details. And so the question before us on this Ascension Day Sunday is this: “What is God saying to us through Luke’s version of how Jesus ultimately left the earth and returned to God?” And a second question is : “ Why does this story matter at all? Why couldn’t the resurrected Jesus simply have stayed with us and continued to be a physical presence to us as friend and shepherd and guide down through the centuries? Imagine how much easier our lives would be if we could just look up on a given Sunday morning and see Jesus sitting beside Harv or between Andrew and Jack? Why did He have to leave?”

When our kids were growing up, we had a fridge magnet that I looked at every day. It said, “There are two things we must give our children. One is roots. The other is wings.”

Why did Jesus have to leave? There are many reasons, but today I would like to focus on just two. One, was so that He could bear witness to the truth: the truth, that we not only come from God, we also return to God. This truth is like roots in which we ground our lives. It shapes our life journey. Whatever the details of our lives may be: whatever the struggles, the failures, the disappointments: however deep our awareness is of how often we have blown it in our Christian walk, we know: we know, through the witness of Jesus, that God loved us while we were still being formed in our mother’s womb. And we know, that when our time comes, that God will be there, to welcome us home.

The story of the Ascension completes the story of Jesus’ life. It also completes the story of our life. It gives us roots. It also gives us wings. I am remembering back to when we were raising our kids. We used to joke that we were going to protect our girls by putting them in a convent and keeping them there until they were 35! We talked about building a self-contained apartment in the basement so our son would never leave home. Like most parents, we adored our kids. We still do. When they were growing up, we worked hard to give them deep roots: values of faith and family and hard work and responsibility, in which to anchor their lives. But as they grew, we learned that these roots were meaningless without the wings. We learned that the strength and value of the roots could only be known when they were tested. We learned that there comes a time when you have to trust your kids enough to let them go.

And so it is with us, who are the beloved children of God. Jesus could well have stayed with his followers and they could have continued to lean on his physical presence. But it was time; time for them to grow up; time for them to own their own faith, and to assume their role as witnesses to the faith. And so Jesus left. He returned to God, and it seems to me that the manner of his return is less important than the fact that He knew that his disciples were ready, and that He trusted them enough, to let them go.

Would it be wonderful to have Jesus physically in our midst today, sitting right there beside Leslie, answering our questions and telling us how to solve our problems, how to make everything right? Well, on the one hand, yes! But on the other hand, how much better it is to know that God believes in us and trusts us enough, to work our way through things in the power of the Spirit who is with us always. How much better to know that we can assume our mantle of being, in Luke’s words, “Witnesses to the end of the earth” . In the song we will sing shortly, the author wrote “We shall go out and tell our stories boldly; we’ll share our joy, with those who still are

weeping; we'll leap and dance the Resurrection story"¹. The story of the Ascension assures us that we can do this, and that we are called to do this, in Jesus' name.

The story of the Ascension matters. It completes the story of Jesus' earthly journey. Through the Ascension we are given roots, and we are given wings!

To God be all glory,

Amen.

¹ "We Shall Go Out With Hope of Resurrection", words by June Boyce-Tillman

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