

Acts 1:1-11

Psalm 47

Ephesians 1:15-23

Luke 24:44-53

We gather together here on Sunday mornings to worship a God that we cannot see. And there may be times when we aren't sure that God even exists, but we are here. Something strong within us brings us to this place to acknowledge God even when we are full of doubts or disbelief. Like a small child who cannot see a favorite object, we know that it's around here somewhere. That favorite stuffed animal that we can't fall asleep without is out of sight, but not out of mind. We know it's here somewhere. We just need to look for it. And oh the delight when we finally turn over the right blanket and it reappears. *That's staying power.* It didn't leave us. It didn't cease to exist. It was simply out of sight. The same thing happens to us in our experience of God. There are times when we are very aware of God's presence in our lives and other times when we wonder if God has ceased to exist. Faith is realizing and knowing on a deep level that even if we can't see or feel God, God still exists. God hasn't gone anywhere and God hasn't ceased to be just because we can't locate God at the moment.

We know about God through the scriptures that tell us about God's creation of the world and God's relationship with creation. We know about God's relational capacity in the sometimes turbulent relationship God had with Israel in the scriptures. We know about God through the prophets who spoke to the people on God's behalf. And we know about God through the psalms that were written by people just like us to express their relationship and understanding of God. And we know about God in the life and teachings of Jesus. We have some idea about the nature of God because God chose to take on human form and live among us to teach us, to heal us, to love us, to model for us all that God wants from us and expects of us and how much God wants to be in a relationship with us.

We celebrate Christmas to mark the occasion when God came to us in human form in the person of the infant Jesus. Christmas was God's entry into the world clothed in the body of a human infant. We learned about God in the life and ministry of Jesus...the descent on him of the Holy Spirit when he was baptized...his withstanding of temptation in the desert...his teaching of the disciples...his healing of the physically ill, the blind, the tormented...his reaching out to those human beings that other human beings had shunned and pushed aside. We found out what was important to God in Jesus' life and teaching. And while God lived among us in the person of Jesus, we learned how much God loved his creation and how much God loved each of

us as his children. We mourned when Jesus was crucified on the cross and we rejoiced on the day of his resurrection. He walked among us and continued to teach us and love us for 40 days after his physical death on the cross. Even physical death could not destroy him or make him cease to exist. *That's staying power.*

Today we celebrate his departure from earth. He gave his disciples their last instructions before he left. He opened their minds so that they could understand the scriptures...so they could understand that those scriptures had been fulfilled by him. He told them that they were to proclaim in his name repentance and forgiveness of sins to all nations beginning from Jerusalem. They were witnesses to these things and they were to spread the word. And he made them a promise. He told them that they should stay in Jerusalem until they had been clothed with power from on high...with power from God...with power that we now know as the Holy Spirit. Jesus was laying the groundwork for the establishment of the church. The church could not come into being unless Jesus departed. We, here at St. Paul's, are part of that legacy that Jesus left behind. Our gathering together every Sunday is what keeps us connected to our Lord and savior even as we know that he is always as close to each one of us as our own breath. *That's staying power.*

But Jesus' ascension tells us much more than just his final instructions and his legacy. His entire life tells us about who God is and how Jesus brought all of humanity...all of us clothed in earthly bodies...back to God. Just think about it. Jesus came into the world as an infant clothed in a human body. That human body grew as Jesus aged. He moved on the earth in that body. He used that body to touch other bodies, to heal other bodies, to speak to others in human bodies, to relate to others in human bodies and when the time came, he died on the cross in a human body. He rose from the dead in a human body complete with scars and marks of the crucifixion. He appeared in his human body to his disciples and more than 500 other people for forty days after the resurrection. And he ascended into heaven in his human body. He has not ceased to exist. He has gone to another location...in his human body. He has gone into the future and is waiting for us. Apparently, Jesus' entry into heaven does not depend on separating his body and soul. That's something for us to think about. Jesus took his humanity...and all of humanity...all of us...with him to heaven. All of humanity was then reconciled to God. We can no longer define God in a way that is detached from human experience. *That's staying power.*

Jesus was carried into heaven still blessing his disciples. Jesus' ascension was not something that he did, but something that was done to him. Just like the resurrection. He was resurrected. He did not rise from the dead by his own volition. The blessing he gave his disciples as he left this earth is an endless blessing. Jesus is still blessing his followers as he leaves. It goes on forever. Jesus did not abandon them or us. All of us can remember the last interaction we had with someone we love. And we retell it multiple times. That interaction just like the interaction

the disciples had with Jesus stays with us. It never leaves us. The disciples retold their experience to all those who would listen and they in turn told it to others. That's why we know what we know about Jesus' time on earth. Bearing witness is part of the charge given to the disciples and it keeps the faith alive as it is told and re-told. *That's staying power.*

The fact that Jesus' ascension was not an abandonment of his disciples or of us is reflected in the reaction the disciples had when they witnessed Jesus being taken up into heaven. They were joyful, not grieving. They worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem from Bethany with great joy. They were continually in the temple blessing God. They were not grieving as one would grieve when contact with a loved one has been broken. Quite the contrary. They were more connected than ever. And they had been empowered to keep faith in the absence of physical presence. *That's staying power.*

We 21st century disciples have been given the same charge: to bear witness to all these events; to share the story and our own experience. We live in the in-between time: the time after Jesus arrived and departed and before he returns. In the meantime, we have been clothed with the power of the Holy Spirit and sustained by a faith that does not require physical presence. We know that God exists even when we are plagued with momentary doubts. We know that Jesus exists. We know that Jesus promised us the Holy Spirit to guide and teach and comfort us and we know that Jesus keeps his promises. We have not, nor will we be, left alone. Just because we cannot physically see Jesus does not mean that he doesn't exist, any more than the favorite teddy bear of our beloved toddler ceases to exist just because it is hidden under the blankets. *That's staying power.*

For that permanence in the world, in our lives and as close as our own breath itself, we can only say:

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.