

“Wait and Witness”

Date: June 2, 2019

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Acts 1:1-11; Luke 24:44-53

Occasion: Ascension Sunday

Theme: Ascension, witness, waiting, glory of Christ

“Can I please, Mommy? Just this once, let me open my birthday present today. I’ll never ask this favor again. Pretty please?!”

Fran was always like that at birthday time. She just couldn’t wait for the day to arrive. She wanted to open her presents as soon as she saw them, birthday or not. Fran’s mother was prepared for this annual tug of war. “No, Fran,” she said. “How many times do I have to tell you? You’ve got to wait until your birthday. Lots of things in life are like that. You just have to learn to wait.”

In the passage from Luke’s gospel, Jesus also counseled waiting. It was the evening of the day of his resurrection from the dead. It was the first Easter evening. Jesus appeared to his disciples in Jerusalem. He helped them to understand their Hebrew scriptures.

He helped them to see that the book we know as the Old Testament pointed to the reality of his suffering, death and resurrection. He commissioned them to preach a message of repentance and forgiveness in his name. “You are witnesses of these things,” he told them.

I think we can imagine the disciples responding to those words. They were ready to go. I can almost see Peter straining forward. “Can we go now, Jesus? Are you finished with us? We’re ready, now. Can we get going with the business of your kingdom?”

And Jesus said, “No! You can’t go yet. First you’ve got wait. First you must receive the power of God. Stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.”

The disciples did as Jesus asked. They waited in Jerusalem. They waited in the temple. They awaited the promise and power of God. And their waiting was not in vain. For that part of the story we need to read the continuation of Luke's story in the book of Acts.

As the book of Acts opens, the disciples are doing just what they were asked to do. They are waiting. Their wait did not last long. The promise of God *did* come upon them on the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples and filled them with power.

Jesus had charged them to wait until the Holy Spirit came upon them. Then and only then did the disciples have the power to be witnesses to Jesus Christ beginning in Jerusalem and moving out through Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

Disciples of Jesus today have a lot to learn from this passage. We can certainly learn something about waiting. Our life of discipleship, that is following Jesus, including our willingness to be witnesses and our plans for ministry and mission – it all begins in waiting.

We wait for the Spirit. We do not have the strength and power in ourselves to be witnesses for the Lord. We *need* the presence of the Spirit in our lives. "Ok," you might say, "so what do I have to do to get the Spirit? Where do I have to go? Is there a special prayer I'm supposed to say? What do I have to do in order to receive the Holy Spirit in my life?"

Not bad questions, but slightly misguided. We tend to think in terms of activity. We feel we need to *do* something in order to *get* something from God. Like, maybe the Church Council should plan some sort of Holy Spirit program to help people get the Spirit.

But Jesus' word to his disciples, however, is a call to waiting. We do not get the Spirit by doing. We get the Holy Spirit by quietly waiting. And

here's what I mean when I use the term "Holy Spirit": the continuing activity of Jesus in our lives. We get the Holy Spirit by waiting. But not just any waiting will do. We wait for the Spirit *at the story of Jesus*.

We await the Spirit of Jesus when we read the story of His life in our Bibles. We await the Spirit when we hear the story of Jesus proclaimed by another. We await the Spirit whenever two or three of us are gathered in Jesus' name. We await the Spirit when we eat the bread and drink the cup of our Lord.

We wait in prayer. The activity of mission and ministry always begins, daily, in the passivity of waiting. In our waiting at the story of Jesus each day, we too shall be clothed with the Holy Spirit. The ongoing presence and power of Jesus will be present in our lives, preparing us to be witnesses for him – in word and in deed.

Back again to the Gospel lesson in Luke. After Jesus had admonished his disciples to wait, he led them out to the town of Bethany. In these final verses of Luke's gospel, we read that there, in Bethany, Jesus lifted his hands and blessed his disciples.

Luke 24 verse 51 reads: "While he blessed them, he parted from them." Luke continues the story over in the book of Acts, his second book in the Bible. In Acts 1:6-11, Luke gives us a fuller version of Jesus departing from the disciples – his ascension into Heaven.

The ascension is also affirmed in the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. We profess our faith saying, "he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father." And yet to the contemporary ear this statement raises all kind of questions. We want think about it scientifically and logically.

Did Jesus simply float up into the clouds, or did he go shooting into the heavens like Superman? Is Heaven up in the sky somewhere – can we discover it by sending rockets into space to look for it? Will we find the body of Jesus floating up there among the stars?

Being seated at the right hand of God is not a reference to some geographical place in the universe where Jesus now sits. The Bible uses language of God's power and victory in behalf of God's people. Jesus ascended into Heaven. Jesus ascended to God's right hand. That is powerful language!

Jesus ascends into God's power. He is enthroned above every form of earthly power and authority. The ascended Lord Jesus reigns over every nation on earth. When we celebrate the ascension of Jesus we are affirming that God has raised him to the place of glory above all of creation.

A body floating among the clouds pales in comparison to what God has done. Jesus Christ is lifted up, raised to glory and given the highest honor. He is Lord of the Universe. Handel, the composer, put this thought to music and choirs now sing:

“The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ. And he shall reign for ever and ever: King of kings and Lord of Lords. Hallelujah!”

Jesus the Anointed One has ascended to the Father. And so he is no longer limited by geography, by flesh, by time or by space. Now he enjoys a universal rule over all people from the right hand of God's power. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him, he told us in Matthew 28:18.

Now he has the authority to rule over your sins and forgive them and to do away with them. Now he has the power to defeat the forces of evil

and death in your life and to give you eternal life. Now he has the love to send His Spirit into your hearts and to transform you, making you a new person from the inside out. Now he can give you're the fruits of the Spirit, so that you may have true life and have it abundantly.

We are witnesses to all these things. In a world that is being overwhelmed with bad news, we need not despair. We can give witness to the crucified, risen and ascended Christ. Jesus, the Ascended One, lives and reigns at God's right hand.

Jesus is Lord of all and He reigns in glory. We shall not lose hope. Clothed with the Holy Spirit, clothed with power on high, we shall bear witness to our ascended ruler who transcends national boundaries in order to bring peace to all the peoples of the earth.

He is Lord of all, and of His kingdom there shall be no end. Glory and power and majesty and dominion be unto the risen and ascended Lord. Amen? Amen!

This sermon borrows heavily Richard A. Jensen; from "the Crucified Ruler," C.S.S. Publishing Co. (7856) Reprinted in *Emphasis*, May 1991.