

“Lift Jesus Higher”

Date: May 17, 2015

Place: Lakewood UMC

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

Occasion: Ascension Sunday

Themes: The Ascension; Witnessing

The liturgically correct day for celebrating the Ascension would have been this past Thursday, on the 40th day after Easter. But in our church, as in many Protestant churches, it is often celebrated on the Sunday afterwards.

Our focus today is upon an unusual event which closed the earthly ministry of Jesus. Perhaps even more than his Resurrection, the Ascension has created unending controversy among believers and scholars alike.

All four of the Gospels report on Jesus' resurrection, in considerable detail. But it is only in Mark and Luke that the ascension is recorded, and only then briefly.

Luke, who is the author of the Gospel which bears his name, is also the author of the Acts of the Apostles. He provides us with the fullest account in the New Testament in the book of Acts.

So, what is this thing called the Ascension? What interpretation can we give it in this age of doubt and skepticism? Does it make any difference whether we accept it as literally happening? What truth lies in it?

Some people wonder about the mechanics of the ascension. Was Jesus the first astronaut in the New Testament? Did Jesus actually lift off? Was the last view of him the bottom of his feet disappearing into the clouds?

Well, the Bible tells us nothing about the ballistics of the ascension, because how Jesus ascended to Heaven isn't that important. What is important is that Jesus has returned to the Father. He is now in complete communion with God. He has been exalted and glorified.

Whether it happened literally, or whether this is a poetic way of saying Jesus was exalted, the point is the same – Jesus is lifted up.

In the Apostle's Creed we affirm: "I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. On the third day he rose again from the dead. He ascended into Heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father. From there he shall judge the living and the dead."

Jesus Christ has ascended to the Father. And so he is no longer limited by geography, by flesh or time or space. No! 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. (Matthew 28:18)

Now he has the authority to rule over your sins, and to forgive them and to do away with them. Now he has the power to defeat the forces of evil and death in your lives, and to transform you, and to make you a new person from the inside out.

The main point of our text today is that we are witnesses of all these things. You and I have *not* been called into the Christian faith to stand around and to engage in idle speculation. Rather, we have been called to tell about our new life in Christ to everyone around us, in fact, to the ends of the earth.

At the center of our text this morning is Jesus' command to his disciples, including us, to be his witnesses. What do you think of when you hear the word *witness*? How many of you think of a court room? I know I do. In the courtroom, both the plaintiff and the defendant can call witnesses to testify on their behalf.

The witnesses will face cross-examination, and they are sworn to tell the truth. But they have been invited to testify, to give their witness, because their testimony is in support of the pursuit of justice. To be a witness for Jesus is to testify on his behalf to the truth.

We speak the truth because Christ has revealed it to us. *These* are the truths that we share: There is salvation in his name. There is forgiveness of sins in the name of Jesus Christ. There is eternal life to all who have faith. There is a joyful and abundant life by following Jesus of Nazareth. This is our testimony.

And yet, it can be lonely in the witness box. On the witness stand, you are there alone. You're cut off from, separated from any advisors or supporters or friends. It's you alone in the witness box. The only foundation you have for the words you share is the truth.

For those who have faith, the truth we speak of is Jesus Christ. We testify about Him, and also, he is with us as we speak. He is our strength and our comfort. And so, we dare to tell others about what Christ has done for us.

Even though we may be shy and bashful, or even timid and fearful, we still dare to share what Jesus has done in our life: forgiven us of our sins; healed us of our diseases; comforted us in our sorrows; guided us through times of confusion; given us peace of mind we never thought we could have.

And because Christ is ascended to the Father, he can be with us when we share our faith. We are not alone; indeed, Christ promised to send us the Holy Spirit so that we might be filled with power. It is the power of Christ within us that enables us to be his witnesses.

Many of you will remember the horror of the Columbine High School massacre back in 1999. The first victim of those mass shootings was a young Christian girl by the name of Rachel Scott. Before she was murdered, her killer asked, "Do you believe in God?"

Knowing what the result would be, she answered, "Yes, I do." And then he shot her. She is a modern-day martyr. She died for her faith. Would you or I have had the courage to do that? Many people, particularly in the Middle East, are facing that challenge today.

In the Greek language, the same word used for witness is also used for martyr. You see, in the early church, and even today, a witness had to be ready to be a martyr. Are you ready to die for your faith in Jesus Christ?

Many Muslim extremists today are willing to die for their faith, in the hopes they will be rewarded with virgins in Heaven. Are you willing to die for your faith in the risen and exalted Lord? We are to be witnesses for Jesus Christ where-ever we go.

Not everyone will be asked to die for their faith. But we are all called to be witnesses. We witness with our words. We witness with our actions. We witness with our lives, by who we are as people. As God lifted Jesus up on the day of ascension, we are to lift him up for the world to see.

The first command Jesus gave us was “Follow me!” The greatest commandment Jesus gave us was “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself.” The last commandment Jesus gave us was, “Be my witnesses.”

“Lift Jesus higher, o lift him higher, lift him up for the world to see. He said, ‘If I be lifted up, I will draw all men unto me.’”

May it be so. Amen.