

“Ascension Living”

Acts 1:1-11; Luke 24:45-53 (NRSV)

5.24.20 Meditation – Memorial Day Weekend/ The Ascension

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Acts 1: ⁹After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. ¹⁰They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ¹¹“Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”

Luke 24 ⁴⁵Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. ⁴⁶He told them, “This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

Luke 24:50 When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. ⁵¹ While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. ⁵² Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. ⁵³And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.

The First Official Memorial Day took place May 30, 1868 at Arlington National Cemetery. It is a time to remember those who died while serving in the armed forces. Throughout the country graves of all veterans are decorated with flags and flowers. Many cemeteries offer Memorial Day services in memory of our lost loved ones. These services are led by laity, pastors, dignitaries and local officials. After my father’s death (a Navy veteran), our mother (accompanied by one or all of us children) faithfully attended the service held at the cemetery where my father’s remains were interred. In my first appointment, the local Memorial Day Service was always a big event and well attended. Many children, grandchildren and relatives of the deceased, traveled miles to be present. Each year I participated in those services. Sadly, as our population grows older and families become dispersed, services if not discontinued, are poorly attended. We’ve become more interested in the present and future than the past. Memorial Day weekend is the unofficial start of summer, the usual beginning of our annual sojourns to the beach, mountains and other favorite vacation spots. Airports usually operate at capacity and highways are normally bumper-to-bumper with vacationers, business travelers, emergency vehicles, police officers and over-worked truckers (who presently are sacrificially attempting to fill the store shelving laid bare by panicking shoppers). Most of us thought this holiday weekend would be different, but we are being shocked by reports of crowds gathering at vacation locations. All of us have “cabin fever” and many of us feel like we have been locked

in a cage. Others think this whole pandemic, social-distancing, wearing mask and sheltering-in-place is a government conspiracy resembling a dictatorship – Nazi Germany. The easing of restrictions is likened to letting “cats out of a bag,” unable to allow just one. We couldn’t wait to be released and we are like a herd of wild buffalo or a child gone wild after leaving a strict home life for the life of a partying collegian. Control is out-the-door. Reminds me of the July running of the bulls in Pamplona, Spain. They’re out and there is no chance of getting them back in the barn. Let us pray that our newfound freedom will not be the death of us. We just don’t like waiting, do we?

In today’s scripture lessons, Jesus tells his disciples to wait. Jesus ordered his disciples to shelter-in-place, to wait there for the promise of the Father. I’m sure they were anxious and it was the longest fifty days of their lives, just as these ten weeks have been for us. Waiting can prepare us. We learn from suffering, but we like neither. We demand our freedoms even though we may be robbing others of theirs. We believed our life styles provided fulfillment even though we continued to seek the superficial promises of the commercial world. Jesus is telling his disciples, that they will be filled with the Holy Spirit, the very presence of God in their bodies. Just like the disciples we want to know when this oppression will end. Jesus promises that they/we will receive the power to see them/us through the worst of times. We struggle to believe in anything that is not tangible or appealing to all our senses.

If waiting wasn’t bad enough, Jesus is about to leave his disciples AGAIN! All these plans they have made to spread the Good News throughout all the known world and now their leader is going to leave them again. What a ‘chicken!’ All of creation awaited and awaits salvation and redemption. A Messiah was promised long ago. Since the Garden of Eden, God’s physical presence had been missing and most thought the fallible prophets were a poor substitute. Finally, God comes in the person of Jesus. He gathered disciples and followers who witnessed him as he, performed miracles, taught, preached, fed and healed. Then he decides to march right into the midst of danger and allows himself to be arrested, humiliated, spat upon, scourged and crucified. The one man the disciples had hoped would be with them forever allowed himself to be put to death and left them alone. Though he promised that he would be raised in three days, few gave credence to those words. Lo and behold, it happened! Jesus arose and walked among his followers. They again believed that he would never leave them. Then in today’s scripture lessons from both Acts and Luke (both written by Luke) unexpectedly, he’s about to leave them again. What’s with this Messiah? He comes to earth, leaves in death, comes back by resurrection and now he leaves again, but promises to return! Not the kind of leader many of us would follow.

But Jesus does two things different this time when he leaves. First, *“he opened their minds to understand the scriptures.”* They began to believe and understand the will of God. Jesus’ life and ministry began to make sense. No longer did they need him to help them understand. Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit had given them a foretaste of the Spirit’s capabilities. His

second promise was the permanent gift of the Advocate, Helper, Comforter, Companion, Holy Spirit, but they had to wait – again. Jesus was telling them that just as the Father sent him into the world to proclaim the Good News, Christ now sends them into the world to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins in his name. Jesus prophesized that they/we would do greater things after he ascended because of the limitations of his human form. The Spirit could be in everyone and everywhere at all times – omnipresent.

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Acts 1:10 They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ¹¹“Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”

And with that Jesus left them again, but his time with a promise of a Helper. Could we compare this to our not being able to go to church? I can hear ‘the two men dressed in white’ saying now, ‘why are you standing here looking for Jesus in the building?’ Has Jesus left us? NO! We are Christ’s church. We are not the building but the people. We continue to be able to be the church, while we are temporarily without a building and sheltering-in-place. Yes, Jesus has ascended (left physically), but he has promised to return. Ascension is about presence in a new form (Holy Spirit) and Jesus’ tangible absence. Just like this pandemic, the whole order of things were being reshaped at the Ascension.

The Gospels portrayed all that Jesus did. Acts is all about action, the response to the Gospel. Action should be our story as well. Jesus now sits on the throne, yet the Spirit lives within us. Now, we are ‘Jesus’ for the world. The ministry of Jesus was the past. The ministry of his followers is now. There is no indication of Jesus telling his disciples how long they would have to wait as they sheltered-in-place. We know that Jesus could have bestowed the Spirit on them instantly. But no, they had to wait, a time to absorb the past, ponder the present and discern the future.

It is natural that we are anxious in the present because we don’t know when the waiting will be over and we will be able to resume life. Waiting can be a time of preparation. Professor Jennifer T. Kaalund likens waiting to the time required in charging the batteries of our new computers and smartphones. In order to optimize them, initially new laptops should be charged a full twenty-four hours and smartphones should be three hours. How many of us have trouble waiting for anything? However, we find after waiting and receiving the full benefit of the wait, we are able to do so much more and for longer periods.

As we wait to return to in-person worship, remove our mask, and be able to shake hands and hug, let us remember Jesus' orders to his disciples. Wait and don't be anxious. Be creative. Continue to be the church. Spend more time with family, the Bible, in prayer, meditation, care for neighbors and plan your response to the Gospel when the new era begins. The time is coming when life will be reordered and we no longer have to have to wait. Jesus has *ascended* and now it *is* our turn to spread the Gospel till his return. Let us continue or let us begin. Do not fear. Don't be anxious. Trust in God. Amen? Amen!