

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
May 16, 2010  
Ascension Sunday  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Acts 1:1-11  
Psalm 110:1-5  
Ephesians 1:15-23  
Luke 24:49-53

Our lessons for today place us in the setting where it has been 40 days or so since Jesus' resurrection. With each passing appearance of Jesus, and with his continued teaching about the Kingdom of God, the disciples become more and more convinced (and more and more confident!) that this is indeed the "real deal." Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah, who has defeated sin and death.

The more time they spend with Jesus, the more they find themselves thinking, "we could really get used to this."

In fact, as Jesus continues to teach, they begin to revive their thinking that Jesus is going to set up an earthly kingdom. They begin planning and scheming again about taking over the city of Jerusalem. In Acts 1:6 they ask: "Lord, are you going to free Israel now and restore our [earthly] kingdom?"

With the benefit of hindsight, we typically chastise the disciples here: "silly disciples, you just don't get it! When will you realize that Jesus' kingdom is not an *earthly* kingdom?"

But the disciples' question is not as silly as we might think. For their scriptures taught that when the Messiah came, he would bring an end to oppression and suffering and would establish God's reign on earth.

Listen again to Isaiah:

*Nevertheless, that time of darkness and despair will not go on forever. The land of Zebulun and Naphtali will soon be humbled, but there will be a time in the future when Galilee of the Gentiles, which lies along the road that runs between the Jordan and the sea, will be filled with great glory. The people who walk in darkness will see a great light -- a light that will shine on all who live in the land where death casts its shadow. Israel will again be great, and its people will rejoice as people rejoice at harvesttime. They will shout with joy like warriors dividing the plunder. For God will break the chains that bind his people and the whip that scourges them, just as he did when he destroyed the army of Midian with Gideon's little band. In that day of peace, battle gear will no longer be issued. Never again will uniforms be bloodstained by war. All such equipment will be burned.*

*For a child is born to us, a son is given to us. And the government will rest on his shoulders. These will be his royal titles: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His ever-expanding, peaceful government will never end. He will rule forever with fairness and justice from the throne of his ancestor David. The passionate commitment of the LORD Almighty will guarantee this! [Isaiah 9:1-7]*

Far from being silly, the disciples' question is a fair one: "Lord, are you finally going to work it all out now?"

And Jesus' answer to them: "Not just yet. You must wait. And be patient."

At this point the disciples are probably scratching their heads in bewilderment. So Jesus continues to teach them. I suspect he said something like this:

“My earthly ministry is complete. But the work of God’s Kingdom is not yet fully complete. We are coming to a transition point in the Father’s plan. I’m going to be exalted, to take my place at the Father’s right hand. But the Father’s kingdom work needs to continue on for a time.

And here’s how it’s going to work. The continuation of the Father’s work in the world is going to shift from *me* to *all of you* -- God’s people. It’s like a relay race. Imagine that I have finished my leg of the race. Now I am ready to pass the baton to all of you. You are now going to be my presence in the world -- my hands, my feet, my voice. I have been my Father’s ambassador, but now all of you will fill that role.”

At this point the disciples’ minds are really churning, and I can imagine Peter, perhaps speaking for all of them, saying: “Lord, let me get this straight. In spite of how well everything is going, you’re telling us that you’re getting ready to leave, and that you’re turning over your work to us?”

Jesus responds, “yes Peter, that’s right.”

And with one voice the disciples respond: “Yeah....right.”

They are thinking, just how are we going to fill Jesus’ shoes, to take over his ministry?

Jesus anticipates their question and says: “Just because I’ll be physically *absent* does not mean I won’t still be *present* with you. For the Father is going to

send the Comforter, the Counselor, the Teacher, the Helper -- the Holy Spirit.

Wait for him. Don't do anything until and unless he is present with you.

But when he comes, you'll be my witnesses, and you'll carry on my work until the Father says it's time for me to bring the Kingdom in its complete fullness."

And then, with the disciples' heads still spinning, Jesus is lifted up in the clouds out of their sight.

Now normally when we have to say good-bye to loved ones, those separations are painful and sad. You would think that would have been the case here with these confused disciples.

But Luke tells us that after Jesus' ascends into the clouds, the disciples worship him and return to Jerusalem with great joy.

How could that be?

Perhaps there are two reasons. First, perhaps it dawned on them that now they had a friend in high places!

And do you know something, brothers and sisters -- so do we! One who sits at God's right hand praying for us and interceding for us even as we gather in this house of worship today.

And we also have reason to be joyful that Jesus ascended. It's the promise of Acts 1:11: "Men of Galilee, why are you standing here staring at the sky? Jesus

has been taken away from you into heaven. *And someday, just as you saw him go, he will return!*”

As we gather at the Lord’s Table this morning, come with gratitude in your hearts, that in the mystery of God’s grace we have been handed the baton and given a share in Christ’s work. But come also with the realization that our Lord will come again to complete the work, and to bring God’s reign in all its fullness and glory.

In the meantime, let us take the grace he offers us here -- take that baton, and run like the wind, eager to extend Jesus’ love to our world.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.