

May 28, 2018
Ascension Sermon

When I read the readings from the Bible I often try to place myself as one of the people in the story. To get an idea of how they might have felt or what they might have been thinking and gain some deeper understanding for myself.

As I read these lessons, I thought about myself as the disciples and my reaction in reading the ascension story the first time was “Jesus is leaving AGAIN?!?” C’mon!

They just got him back!

But really, Jesus is leaving all the time in the gospels. They don’t usually use the word leaving though. We hear words like travel, walk, climb, teach, go, wander.

As a child, his parents can’t find him because he left them to go to the temple.

He leaves the large crowds to take a break from teaching.

Each time he goes to a new town or city he has to leave the place he is currently teaching.

On Maundy Thursday Jesus leaves dinner with his disciples to go and pray.

And on Good Friday he leaves again. By death on the cross.

But he doesn’t stay still then either! Jesus leaves again! His body is not in the tomb when they roll away the stone.

And now, Jesus has been resurrected. He’s met his disciples on the road, twice. He’s eaten with them twice. And Jesus tells them some things to prepare them.

I would imagine that all this back and forth would get a little worrisome, a little confusing for the disciples. It would be for me if I was among them in that time.

And in the Acts reading we hear the disciples ask “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” In other words, you’re the messiah we’ve been waiting for, you’ve fulfilled the scripture. Are we done here?

But Jesus isn’t done. He’s getting ready to leave again. To ascend into heaven to be seated at the right hand of God. Jesus knows this is the plan.

Yes, Jesus keeps leaving but this time it's different. Jesus does things he hasn't before when he's left on earlier occasions. He gives his followers a job, he promises them help in the form of the Holy Spirit and he blesses them as he goes.

Jesus tells the disciples and those who were with them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be *proclaimed in his name* to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things."

Jesus says, you've witnessed this, now you have to proclaim it. Jesus' followers were the first witnesses. But we are ALL witnesses. And we must proclaim Jesus.

At my day job, my office has been participating in various marketing trainings. One of them talked about having a 30 second or less "elevator speech". It's supposed to be a quick sentence or two. A brief explanation that captures why you do what you do and why someone else should care. What if we created "why I go to church" elevator speeches? Or "why Jesus matters" elevator speeches?

It would be a challenge to shrink down our experiences with the divine into a sentence or two. And I've seen poor examples of this on billboards or bumper stickers that make our faith in Jesus sound like some sort of ultimatum. And I'm of the opinion that ultimatums won't open someone's heart or mind to what God can do in our lives.

But the Ascension is a huge moment for the disciples. And it's in this moment that Jesus tells them to proclaim Him to all the nations. And we need to search out those moments in our own lives, big or small where we know God has been at work. And then find a way to tell those stories to the people in our lives.

Lutherans aren't known for being the best evangelizers. It's not quite in our DNA. We aren't usually the loudest people when it comes to talking about our faith. But if we don't tell the story, then the story won't be known. If we don't proclaim Jesus. Then Jesus won't be known.

I'd like to do something a little different and give you a chance to think now about what your elevator speech might include. We'll take a minute of quiet and I want you to think about what story you might tell or what you might say to the person who asks you "Why did you go to church this morning?" or "Does God make a difference?" or "Why are you a Christian?"

(Paul plays for two minutes)

Thank you for doing that with me. I know it's a lot to think about but I think it's important for us to have responses ready so that we can share the story when the opportunity presents itself.

Scholars believe that the author of the gospel of Luke is the same author who wrote Acts. Which makes the book of Acts a continuation of the same story. A part 1 and a part 2 if you will. Part 1 being the acts of Jesus. Part 2 being the acts of Jesus through the disciples.

And we are Part 3. We must continue the story. By our actions and by our telling of it.

Jesus may always be leaving in the gospels and sometimes it can be hard to tell that Jesus is with us today but as we live out our faith and share our stories we bring Jesus to the present for others.

Jesus gave these instructions to his disciples a long time ago. And he gives US these instructions today. "The messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations"

And Jesus blesses us and clothes us with power from on high. We are the witnesses to these things. So we tell our stories and share our elevator speeches and proclaim Him across the nations. In Jesus name. Amen.