

He Ascended: Where Is Jesus Now?

Acts 1:1-11

Theme: The Ascension of Jesus is neither his end nor his exit, but yet another announcement of His evolving presence among His people.

One of the constants in what I call the Holy moments of Jesus' life is the great fear of the people who witness Him. Think about it. Great fear seizes the shepherds at His birth. Great fear overwhelmed those three disciples who accompany Him at the Mount of transfiguration. Great fear entered the hearts and minds of those who witness His miracles....I think of the response to the raising of Lazarus. Great fear seizes the disciples in the boat when Jesus calms the storm. They ask, "who is this that wind and sea obey Him"? Great fear and dread nearly overwhelm the women who visit Jesus' tomb on Easter morning. "Who will roll away the stone for us? They have stolen his remains, we know not where they have laid Him." Great fear, uncertainty and doubt invade the lives of His followers as though they are terrified, which in the end they are. Now, at the ascension story for today, the same response shows forth. Great fear, apprehension.

The window features it well. You can see it in the faces of the onlookers. They appear skittish, restless, seeking a place to hide or grasping for some security to hold on to. At least two things are happening that they find hard to bear: One, they simply do not understand the coming and going of Jesus. Surely some disciples are plain "gun-shy" about His Easter appearance and what appears to be His imminent disappearance. What are they to believe about this savior who comes and goes, seemingly at the most inconvenient time? What will they tell other followers who crave some kind, any kind of assurance that He is still there? How will they explain Jesus exit when there is so much unfinished business...healings to do, reconciliations to achieve, quarrels to settle? Secondly, they simply do not understand. The risen Lord rises yet again. He is risen from the dead. He is rising unto Heaven. The artist Salvador Dali depicts the ascension in an almost unimaginable way: as a disciple one looks from the bottom up, at the soles of Jesus' feet as He ascends into a tube of beautiful light.

Regardless of what you think about his image of Jesus ascending, the artist Charlie Lawrence gets the onlookers right. They are fitful, afraid, struck by the incomprehensibility of it all. They are like witnesses to a far off atomic blast for the first time. Their colors are bold and bright...yellow, blue, red, orange and more yellow. Some shudder. Others cower. Still others clasp hands in desperation. One disciple turns away as though ready to run. All the while Jesus is featured in a glorious white in contrast to the white of the crucifixion. The wounds in His hands and feet as well as His side are still visible. The light above Him seems to be dancing to the sounds of one thousand trumpets.

This is precisely the point where we need to hear the entire text, since the story does not end this way. Two anonymous men in white, mysterious and supernatural address the

crowd : Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up? This Jesus who has been taken up, will return to you in the same manner you see Him go.” The words are full of meaning, not locked in time but tension between what has been and what will be. This Jesus who has been taken, will come again . What has been will yet come to be! I wish I had pressed Charlie Lawrence to capture this tension. For what the story yearns to tell is the assurance that He will come again, come just as He departs, with surprise, unpredictably, without forewarning. Just as He ascends today to assume His seat at the right hand of God, He will come into the world of today, where people live in fear and anxiety.

The question “Where Is He?” lingers after the image of the ascension fades, and the disciples return from the Mount called Olivet. Where is this Jesus? The answer I hear is this: He is your light when the world around you has grown totally dark. He is your peace when the world around you has divided into ten-thousand divisions. He is your Hope when the heaviest of despair has overwhelmed you. He is Life, when dreadful death has darkened your doorstep. He is your love when you experience the pain of indifference or hate. He is your heaven, when the hells of fallen humanity threaten to overtake you. “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up?” It is a rhetorical question. They look up because they know not what to say or do! The second half of the Ascension story is the promise of how Jesus will come again, just as He came unto His people in the first place.

I was in Immokalee this week. I was there to visit a student I had at the seminary who now works for the Coalition of Immokalee workers. She is smart, witty, encouraging and encouraged. She is trilingual, which is a good thing in her line of work. She has worked in Argentina and Guatemala. She loves little children and older adults. She has a heart for the underdog, which is why she is there. She loves Jesus Christ. But she failed her Presbyterian Polity exam! (which is one of the reasons I was there). And she is apprehensive about taking it again on August 28th. Before we tackled sample questions on old exams, and before we had lunch at Lozanos, she introduced me to a young man named Lionel from Guatemala who introduced me to their new community center. He was proud and he was fast, sometimes thinking I could understand his Spanish before Kim could translate it.

I asked him what had motivated him to get involved. He described a day when he saw two women abused in the field where they were picking tomatoes. They were abused by a ruthless boss who chastised them for talking about where they were going to get lunch. It was two in the afternoon. They had been working since 5:00 am. Lionel was indignant. Two women should not be mistreated for talking to one another while doing their job. Lionel joined us for lunch, eating one of his chicken burritos and saving the other for later. Kim declared that going to a restaurant is a big treat, for her and for Lionel. Breaking bread together is a sacred reminder of the love of God which breaks down barriers and unites us, not just in church, but wherever two or three are gathered in His name!

What’s the ascension window have to do with a Thursday trip to Immokalee? Or, what can a Thursday trip to Immokalee possibly have to do with our ascension window? It is the message, “Be Not Afraid”. Be not afraid of doing what is right. Be not afraid of

speaking up. Be not afraid of God's absence, for He comes to us just as He left us at His ascension... No need to gaze heavenward unsure. No need to probe the skies for the God we love and need. He is more likely to be appearing in places and amongst people when we least expect Him. To heal the broken and comfort the afflicted, to welcome the prodigal, and save the condemned. To love the loveless, and make new the old. To bless a table at Lozanos in Immokalee, a table of strangers made one in Jesus Christ.

Our window series concludes today. But the greatest story ever told continues. Our sermon series on this Sacred stained glass concludes but the one who originally told this story continues it in many contexts. It is the story not just of our search for God, but God who searches for us. Of God who will not rest until all men and women say "yes" to His call and claim. That's why these windows are here, why we are here for that matter. They do tell the old, old story of our redemption. They describe the sequence of God's mighty acts, of wiping away our fears and in their place, showing the courage of the Messiah.

Where Is Jesus Now? He is at the right hand of God. He is also at your right hand and within your heart as He tunes it to His will. Forget that and we forget our reason for living. Remember that and nothing will ever harm us, nothing at all.

People of Galilee, why look up? Jesus whom you saw depart is coming again. To that we say, Alleluia, amen!

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