

June 4 5, 2011

Easter 7A

Acts 1:6 – 14

Left Behind for Good

Did you notice? Last Thursday was Ascension Day. This Sunday, the 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Easter is Ascension Sunday. Next week is the festival of Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit to the first Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus. In today's reading Jesus leaves, but we stay. As it turns out, this is the ultimate "left behind" story, but according to Jesus, being left behind isn't a sign that we're not saved, or a last chance to redeem ourselves. Nope, in today's reading, the one from Acts and the gospel reading we didn't hear, being left behind is an honor. It's an invitation to participate in the glory of God. It's a commissioning, Jesus is asking us to continue the work of caring for God's people and making the world a better place.

Rev. Barbara Lundblad cut to the chase in her Ascension Sunday sermon of several years ago; "What are we to make of Jesus' Ascension? Of course, it's not out of the question that Jesus defied gravity, but is that the real point? Is the Ascension about gravity or spirituality, geography or vocation?"

After dodging one last silly questions from disciples that don't quite get it – "When will you restore the kingdom to Israel?" That never was Jesus' goal, only theirs; to return Israel to its former political power. Finished with his last minute advice, Acts tells us that Jesus is lifted up into the air, and the disciples stand there staring into the sky until two angels ask them why they're loitering, "Why do you stand looking toward heaven?" Even though the angels promise Jesus' ultimate return, he gave them and gives us direct instruction for their time and place, and ours. Be witnesses to him. Do his work. In the whole world. Our work is right here and now, not some future time and place.

So, in a way we are called to a higher place, a higher calling. Not to escape this life for another, but here and now to claim a vision and mission that is sacred, is bigger than we are. We don't need to look to the heavens to find inspiration. Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would guide and energize us, if we can manage to see beyond ourselves. Our lives are here—to heal, to welcome, to fix injustice, and to love. We don't need to wait for a far off day of perfection and

rapture. If the Holy Spirit is always with us, then right here and now can be the day of transformation and fulfillment, if we only have courage and vision to dream new dreams.

Does the angels' question sound familiar to you? We heard it seven weeks ago, on Easter morning, at Jesus' tomb. Maybe it was the same two angels who tapped the stunned women on the shoulder as they had come to Jesus' tomb to do what they couldn't do at the time of his death, prepare his body. Remember what the angels asked seven weeks ago? "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" One more time, Jesus isn't where the disciples thought he'd be. He's one step ahead. So like the women, the men stood slack jawed, looking at the sky. And we do the same thing sometimes. When we look longingly at the past, remembering only the good stuff, and pining to return, instead of letting that Holy Spirit lead us to create a new present. When we ignore the poverty, hunger, sickness, prejudice, and injustice in the world around us, and stay in our comfortable worlds, we're right there by the those disciples, gazing longingly into the little bit of heaven we claim for ourselves. Those two angels are tapping us on the shoulder, asking us to stop loitering, to move along, and Jesus is asking us to be his witnesses here and now, to all the hurt in the world.

I read this week of a wonderful artist's rendering of Jesus' ascension. It was a black and white woodcut print, finely etched. In the picture Jesus is rising up as the disciples watch him disappear into the clouds. If you look closely at the picture, not in the clouds, but on the ground, you can see footprints on the earth. The artist has carefully etched Jesus' footprints down on the level where the disciples are standing with their mouths open. I don't know what the artist meant to convey with that. Humor? Simple fact? It hits me as very meaningful. That maybe the artist was theological smart, and was asking the same question as the angels, "Why do you stand looking up into heaven? Look at these footprints here on the earth." Jesus is here, with us. Just as surely as he walked in the wilderness resisting temptation, at the well with the Samaritan woman, down the street with outcast tax collector Zaccheus, in the temple, turning over the tables of the money changers, on his way to Calvary.

We have been left behind, for good. The ascension calls us to leave Jesus' footprints here on earth, to be his witnesses. And God's Holy Spirit blows us in the right direction and gives us courage. In this time, in this place, there's no one but us to do his work, to love the lonely, feed the hungry, welcome the outcast, teach God's laws, worship God. May we have the courage, the vision, the passion, to be Jesus' faithful followers.