

Pastor Jon's May 12, 2024 Sermon on Ascension from Acts 1.

“No Gawking Rule”

Today we celebrate what is known as the Ascension of Jesus. It is the day when Jesus is lifted up into the clouds and taken out of the apostle's sight 40 days after the Easter. But they won't be abandoned. Jesus told them to wait for the coming Holy Spirit in Jerusalem.

Fun fact: Did you know that according to ascension rituals in the early church, people would eat birds or fowl of any kind on Ascension Day, which was May 9th this year, to represent Jesus flying away. So, if you haven't planned your menu, you could eat chicken today to celebrate the ascension. LOL

Imagine that, watching your Lord and teacher fly away mysteriously as you stare up into the sky. This story in a small way, reminds me of the first time I accidentally let go of a helium balloon. The shock immediately sets in, you scream, and the tears start flowing. Your parent tried to console you, or they may say something like, see, I told you not to let go. Nevertheless, you helplessly and wondrously stare as your balloon painfully drifts out of sight.

The ascension also reminds me of my favorite Disney Pixar movie “Up”... you know the one with the balloons carrying the house. The film centers on Carl Fredricksen, an elderly widower who travels to South America with stow away, wilderness explorer, Russell, in order to fulfill a promise that he made to his late wife Ellie. They always dreamed of going to Paradise Falls together. Alone and disheartened, Carl finally has the strength to look through Ellie's scrapbook and discovers that she filled the blank pages with photos of their life together, and noted at the end... "Thanks for the adventure - now go have a new one!" With new vigor, and a new friend... after he was forced out of his neighborhood by developers... Mr. Fredrickson and Russel fill oodles of Helium Balloons and float his house to Paradise Falls. His grief turned into joy.

Imagine Jesus' disciples. They already lost him once at the crucifixion. Now the ascension. Luke says in the Gospel they were filled with joy. But I think of what it feels like to lose a loved one. It can be painful. Jesus is going ahead of them and sit at the right hand of the Father in heaven until he comes again. In the meantime,

through the Holy Spirit, Jesus lives in each of us. We, the church, are his hands and feet in the world today. We are the ones now called to be witnesses of the Good News of Jesus to the ends of the earth.

How do you carry on the witness of a loved one after they have died? On this Mother's day, how can we carry on the legacy of all the faithful women we have encountered in our lives?

One way to look at this text is through the lens of problem and promise.

The problem in the text from Acts 1 is that the apostles are now left on their own to share the good news of Jesus... starting in Jerusalem, to all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. But they are standing there gawking up at heaven... probably in shock and tears as Jesus is whisked away. But here, God has instituted a no gawking rule. Two men in white robes show up... signifying angels in Luke/Acts... and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." In other words, don't just stand there staring up into the sky, remember what he told you... you got work to do.

The promise is that Jesus ordered them to not leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father i.e. to wait to be baptized by the the Holy Spirit... which as we will find out next week in church, will come 10 days later at the Pentecost. The Holy Spirit did come as advertised and the Apostle's received miraculous language gifts and went out and spread the message of Jesus and his love.

For us today, the problem is maybe we are a little too comfortable keeping our faith at a distance. Is faith one more thing on the to do list, or is it part of the fabric of our everyday lives, the ethical decisions we make, the way we speak to and treat others? My hope is the latter. Faith isn't just a Sunday thing. If you think about it, much of our thinking and movements revolve around earthly things. How many of you think about money every day? Jesus reminds us to set our minds not on earthly things, but on heavenly things.

The promise for us is we too are called to be apostles. (which means sent ones)... witnesses. In the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, Jesus calls his followers salt of the earth and light of the world. My

two favorite metaphors for us Christians. Salt in addition to being a preservative, was one of the most precious commodities in Jesus' time. Being called salt meant you are precious in God's sight. The right amount of salt brings out the best flavors in the food we eat. Being called the salt of the earth by Jesus means you are called to make the communities you are a part of better. I told my daughter the other day that Jesus calls us salt. I said, "It is your job at school to salt your classroom and make it the best it can be. With you there, it is better."

More of the promise for us is that we too have received the Holy Spirit in our baptism and continue to show up here at church because of the work of the Holy Spirit. We have unique gifts that can bring out the best in the teams we are a part of, our work, our families, and our world. We are witnesses to Jesus' love, albeit imperfectly as sinners, but we also live under the wing of God's grace. We receive God's love, forgiveness, and grace daily. We receive that grace today in holy communion and in the word.

May that Grace move you forward from whatever you are dealing with in your life into new adventures. May you know of a God who is far off somewhere, but close to us thanks to the work of the Holy Spirit. Amen