

David C. Myers  
June 5, 2011  
Ascension Sunday  
Communion

## ***“Some Final Instructions”***

Acts 1:1 – 14  
Luke 24:44 – 53

Text: “And see, I am sending upon you what My Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” . . . Acts 24:49

*“Jesus replied, ‘It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’ When Jesus had said this, as they were watching, He was lifted up, and a cloud took Him out of their sight. While He was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, . . .”*

Jesus’ disciples looked up in the heavens to see where their teacher had gone. Luke’s Gospel tells us that their gaze was fixed, their look earnest and protracted. They wanted to see; but Jesus’ ascended into a big cloud – like a first century astronaut. This resurrected rabbi, who had instructed His followers for the past 40 days, floated out of their lives as mysteriously as he had entered them.

Had we been there we might have been as dumbfounded as the disciples. What had first entered their life in the flesh and blood of a rabbi, then a resurrected rabbi, now was gone. In Luke’s Gospel Jesus was “taken up” in Luke’s version in Acts Jesus was “lifted up” – it doesn’t much matter – Jesus was gone. And for the disciples, that’s what hurt. All they had left was distant memories and recent promises. Like parents waving goodbye to a soldier headed off to war, or a family staring at a hearse pulling away from the church with mom or dad inside, the disciples’ next steps were not going to be easy ones.

“Where do we go from here?”

And that could be our own question when we feel the absence of a Christ who had once been so present. We remember what the church used to be in days gone by.

Perhaps we would remember Jesus’ words of guidance – Jesus’ final instructions, if you will.

And there are two; one of them common to both accounts recorded in our Scripture Lessons this morning.

**1.) The first is found only in the Acts account. It is Jesus’ advice not to try to box God in.** As they gathered on the Bethany side of the top of the Mount of Olives, they asked Him, “Lord, is this the time when You will restore the Kingdom of Israel?”

Isn't it always all about us? About what *we* want?

Lord, isn't this the time when you will restore Israel to the great nation it was under Kings David and Solomon? We have our own versions in today's times. Isn't this the time when the United States will recover the glory of the post WWII and Korean Wars? When family values prevailed and everyone went to church? Lord, isn't this the time when You make the sanctuary full like it was in the good ole days? These are questions of restoration; preserving the past; trying to re-create what our memories think happened back then.

But sometimes our memories get clouded. While sanctuaries were filled in the 50's and 60's our streets were torn asunder by civil rights riots, our nation was deeply divided over a war half-way round the world. Women were clamoring to have equal pay and equal rights. I remember those years; and as an aspiring minister I had many a midnight bull session around campfires at church camp and in smoke-filled dorms about why I would want to spend my life in the church that seemed so irrelevant to the chaos of society around me.

And Jesus was so much more diplomatic. But Jesus also knew that God moves through our lives always a bit ahead of us, always leading us – either through the church or perhaps in some cases even through the turmoil of society into places where love and justice might prevail more than the current practice.

Jesus said to them, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by His own authority. **But** you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come to you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:7 – 8) In other words it's not our attempts to recreate the past, it's not our hope to relive the remembered glories we so long for. God is trying to move us forward not by restoration, but by transformation!

We may also recall the words the angel of the Lord gave to the women at the tomb on the first Easter morning: “But go, tell His disciples and Peter that He is going before you to Galilee; there you will see Him.” God is always leading us forward, transforming us and the world around. God does not go backward, preserving what used to be.

Last Thursday at Annual Conference Bishop Schol gave his “State of the Conference” address and spoke about the Bishops' Call to Action – a plan set forth by our Bishops that will help the church reverse 40 years of decline. He distinguished between technical changes and substantive changes. Changing the hour of worship, putting attendance registers in the pews, changing coffee hour – those are examples of technical changes – then the Bishop said, ultimately technical changes won't reverse our decline. It would be like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. Substantive changes are changes in attitudes that enable us to be more welcoming – particularly of non-religious and nominally religious persons.

The next day Bishop Schol reported that many people had asked him what a “nominally religious person” was. And he said he would give an example – his daughter. And before he had four sentences out of his mouth I think that more than 2/3 of the clergy had tears in their eyes; because so many of us have “nominally religious” children.

Bishop Schol said they gave their daughter the best religious upbringing they could, but now as a young adult she doesn't go to church much anymore. He went on to say that if you were to ask her "Why?" she would give you several good reasons: she doesn't feel accepted; people in churches want to change her and have her conform to their exercise of worship; they want to know where she has been between the occasions when she has come. She sees the church being exclusionary and prejudiced and wonders why she should seek God there when she is able to find God elsewhere.

She goes on to say she finds a spiritual home in yoga classes with a group of young women who are non-judgmental and accepting. They talk about all the problems of their lives – talking freely without fear of being judged. The Bishop says it breaks his heart that she can't find a home in the church. But when he reflects on the reasons she gives, he says maybe it isn't she that needs to change, but that we are the ones who need to change. His last words were powerful. "We talk about growth and getting new members and reaching out to young adults but concluded 'until we change, it just doesn't matter.'"

"Until we change, it just doesn't matter."

Being hospitable and welcoming means being non-judgmental. It means being open to the gifts that the stranger brings us. Perhaps it means changing what we do so that the non-religious and the nominally religious can experience the God of grace and welcoming.

That is an example of the substantive change the church needs to make in order to reverse the decline. That is an example of Christ going before us, leading the way into a new future. It is an example of being witnesses of a welcoming God and a welcoming church moving forward when it has received the power of the Holy Spirit.

2.) The second final instruction Jesus gave before ascending is to stay in Jerusalem and wait, praying for the Spirit to cloth them with power.

So how do these followers respond to the last command of Jesus? "They returned to Jerusalem with great joy. . . . All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer." (Acts 1:12 and 14) They were told to be witnesses to the ends of the earth – and the first and immediate response is prayer.

We ask what the church is to do after the excitement of Easter and resurrection. The assignment is to witness in all the world. And how do we go about doing that? Critical is gathering together as the church, not as isolated individuals. There is a time for personal, private piety. But there is also a time to gather as a community of God's people.

The first followers knew that. They gathered together while waiting to receive the promised power of the Holy Spirit. According to the last statement and command from Jesus before being lifted up, the power must come before the witnessing begins. And as God's people wait for the power of the Holy Spirit, they wait in prayer. Prayer is the stance of the community of faith as it waits for the power of the Spirit to come upon it.

Those early followers did not dash to Jerusalem to start preaching on street corners. Nor did they contact the local evangelist to gather huge crowds to hear their witness. They returned to join others in waiting. And they prayed during that time of waiting. A Quaker moment? Perhaps.

Jesus gave a command which called for an immediate response – and the response was to hurry up and wait. God’s people were wise enough to pray during this time of waiting, this time of waiting together.

With Jesus ascending to Heaven, God’s people wondered what to do. And they told to witness in all the world.

But first . . . we must be empowered by the Spirit. Therefore, on this seventh Sunday of Easter as we await the great festival of Pentecost, the coming winds of the Holy Spirit, it is time to devote ourselves to prayer.

I invite you to join me in prayer.

*O God, You are a God of grace and acceptance. Help us receive that same spirit so that we may open ourselves to the spirit you have given all those who come through our doors. And help us, O God, to be as welcoming as You; when, through Your Son, you welcomed a Samaritan woman at a public well; you visited the home of a Roman soldier, You healed a Syro-Phoenician woman. Let us heed Your words to witness Your welcoming love in Chevy Chase, in the Capital region, in all the United States, and to the ends of the world. Amen!*