

Hope Lutheran Church. Fresno

7th Sunday of Easter &
Ascension

Dr. Jan L. Womer

“A”

May 5, 2008

Acts 1: 6-14

Psalm 68:1-10, 33-36

I Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11

John 17: 1-11

In the yearly flow of the church year we walk through the events of Jesus' life for six months. We re-live those events in our mind – from his birth, to his baptism, to his cross and to his resurrection. Three days ago, on Thursday, the church celebrated Jesus' Ascension – his return to God's realm.

In today's reading from the Book of Acts we hear a description of Jesus' last minutes with the Disciples before leaving them and returning to God. Jesus gathered these friends and told them what they were to do:

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. (Acts 1: 8)

Keep that scene in your mind as you jump 2,000 years and think of your own life.

Can you remember when you took your first driver's license test? The adult who went with you got out of the car and the examiner climbed in. You turned the key and started the engine. Panic set in. You were on your own. It was now 100% in your hands. Whatever was to take place was up to you!

The powerful spiritual message of Jesus' Ascension came to me in the first hour of my first day serving as a pastor in a congregation. I walked into the church office, was greeted by the office staff, went into my office and sat down at the desk. Wow! Here I was. Finally I was beginning my life as pastor in a congregation!

I was there for 20 minutes reveling in my new job. Filled with pride and joy. The phone rang. "Pastor, please come quickly. The paramedics are pulling our two year old son out from the bottom of the swimming pool."

My world of joy and fantasy crashed in and the reality of life became so painfully real. Seminary classes, lectures and books do not give us simple answers. I drove a few blocks to the house and pulled in behind the fire engine. My panic had set in. What do you say? What do you do? Isn't a pastor supposed to be of help and have magic words of comfort that take away the crushing grief that comes as you look at a tiny, lifeless body? How do you deal with the tears that fill your own eyes? Jesus' ascension had handed the situation to me as one of his followers.

Jesus' words on the day of his Ascension cry out to every one of us who bears his name as a *Christian*, a *little Christ* in the world today:

*You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you;
and you will be my witnesses.....*

Ascension day is the reminder that Christ has placed the future of his message, his work, his healing power for the world in your hands and mine. That, for me, is the most frightening message of the Gospel!

You and I are in the car taking our test and where it goes is in our hands; but we are not alone and forsaken – Jesus' promise is with us: *You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you...*

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What a different understanding of religion and of life and of the world Jesus describes! I believe it is a view of religion and the church and the community and of our own life that Jesus is holding before each of us.

Jesus told the Disciples:

You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem...

They could handle that – it was safe territory! A lot of strangers visited the city but the residents were primarily Jews who spoke Aramaic; they were all quite similar - same looks, same customs, same history.

But Jesus went on: be my witnesses...in all Judea and Samaria...

Jesus, what is this all about? We can understand going around Judea. All the inhabitants are just like us. This is our homeland.

But Samaria? Those Samaritans are heretics; we have been taught to dislike them since we were mere children. They have accents and a different history and they don't agree with us when we say you have to worship at the Temple in Jerusalem. Do we really want to witness to them about our faith?

Then Jesus really did it: *be my witnesses...to the ends of the earth.*

Jesus, did we hear you right? You want us to go out and talk to Romans and Greeks and Ethiopians. You want those barbarians up there in Europe – funny looking people with big noses and hair that isn't nice and black and skin that looks washed out because isn't light olive brown – we are to tell them that you are God's Son and you love them?

You also expect us to talk to people that speak strange sounding languages? They have never even heard of the Scriptures...they don't know who Abraham or Moses are; they have never sung the Psalms. We are supposed to offer them the gift of eternal life that you have brought?

All these questions....and Jesus gave no answer:

When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. (Acts 1:9)

Jesus was not giving his Disciples a statement that they were to debate and write about in reports. Jesus was not asking for committees to do studies about what mission is all about and how to do it. Don't analyze and talk it to death!

Jesus gave a command! – to Peter, and James, and John and Andrew and you and me.

Be my witness...at home, in the community, in the world. I'm leaving the task in your hands.

You don't need to check out who knows the right Bible passages;
who has the right culture or genealogy or national origin;
who speaks your language with the acceptable accent.

Be my witnesses to every living human being...in Jerusalem and Samaria and the world.

Jesus' Ascension was not the end; it was the beginning of **our** ministry in Christ's name.

Today we have before our eyes the vision that Jesus shared with his Disciples when he handed to them the work of proclaiming his message to the world:

Go... to all those whom you meet and share with them the message of acceptance and equality that all human beings share in the sight of God.

The Church of Jesus Christ must not become a country club where a few people get their jollies by running some little programs that they happen to like. The task of every Christian congregation is to be that gathering of human beings who have one vision before them:

the vision of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior who demands that we listen to the cries of every culture, every language, every human life that seeks meaning and hope in God.

Today our Scriptures bring us face to face with the Living Christ who has returned to the realm of God but who, through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, gathers and nourishes us, the Church, that the church may live in mission to the world.

The ultimate goal for every congregation must become a community and a place where the way is paved for the Holy Spirit to reach into each human life in our midst and draw each life into Jesus Christ.

Go! Jesus says to us today. The work I began in now in your hands. Farewell!