

IN THE MEANTIME
(Ascension Sunday)
Acts 1:1-11

Yesterday Lorie and I were at the drug store buying Mother's Day cards for our moms. We were pushing through all the other last minute shoppers, when Lorie found a beautiful well-crafted card that had only three copies left. I said, "Perfect. Buy all three: One for your mom, one for mine, and one for me to give to you."

Looking around the greeting card aisle, I noticed there were tons of Mother's Day cards. There were graduation cards, because that's happening this time of year. There were even wedding and anniversary cards, because a lot of people get married in May.

But I didn't notice any "Ascension Day" cards! This is a special day that's only celebrated in the church. It hasn't been commercialized in the least. There is no "Ascension Bunny" who comes down from heaven to deliver chocolate eggs. I guess this is one holiday that's all ours.

Look with me at Acts 1, verses 1-11:

In my first book I told you, Theophilus, about everything Jesus began to do and teach² until the day he was taken up to heaven after giving his chosen apostles further instructions through the Holy Spirit.³ During the forty days after he suffered and died, he appeared to the apostles from time to time, and he proved to them in many ways that he was actually alive. And he talked to them about the Kingdom of God.

⁴ Once when he was eating with them, he commanded them, "Do not leave Jerusalem until the Father sends you the gift he promised, as I told you before. ⁵ John baptized with water, but in just a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

⁶ So when the apostles were with Jesus, they kept asking him, "Lord, has the time come for you to free Israel and restore our kingdom?"

⁷ He replied, "The Father alone has the authority to set those dates and times, and they are not for you to know. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

⁹ After saying this, he was taken up into a cloud while they were watching, and they could no longer see him. ¹⁰ As they strained to see him rising into heaven, two white-robed men suddenly stood among them. ¹¹ "Men of Galilee," they said, "why are you standing here staring into heaven? Jesus has been taken from you into heaven, but someday he will return from heaven in the same way you saw him go!"

- Acts 1:1-11, *New Living Translation*

Today, on the last Sunday of the Easter season, we celebrate the fact that the risen Jesus spent 40 days with his disciples, and then he was lifted up into heaven before their very eyes.

But what does that mean to you and me? Jesus gets to fly like Superman. How does that help us?

What difference does the ascension make to our ordinary, everyday lives? Three things ...

#1- Jesus is now at the right hand of the Father interceding for us

“Christ Jesus, who died--more than that, who was raised to life--is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.”

--Romans 8:34, New International Version

That means that for you to talk to God

- you don't have to go through a priest
- you don't have to go through a saint
- you don't have to go through a pastor like me,

You can go directly to God through the Son, Jesus Christ!

The story is told of a union soldier during the civil war, sitting outside the white house. A little boy comes up to him and says, “What’s the matter soldier?” The soldier says, “I’ve been wounded and discharged, and they won’t pay me my pension.” The little boy says, “Come with me.” And he takes the wounded soldier into the White House, past all the guards, right into the president’s office, and there sits Abraham Lincoln ... and the boy says, “Dad, this soldier needs your help!”

That’s the power you have in addressing the God of the universe. The ascension means that Jesus is at the right hand of God interceding for you.

#2- Jesus can be everywhere

When Jesus was walking the earth in the flesh, he could only be in one place at a time. Now that Jesus has moved into the eternal realm, he is no longer limited by time or space.

Think of a puddle of water that gathers in a low spot in your yard. As long as it’s a puddle it can only be in one place. But when it evaporates, it’s taken up into the clouds, and then it can cover the earth in the form of rain.

Jesus ascended into heaven so that he could cover the earth in the form of the Holy Spirit. In John 16, he says, *“...It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.”*

--John 16:7 New International Version

The ascension means that Jesus can be everywhere.

#3- Jesus is coming back.

“Men of Galilee,” they said, “why are you standing here staring into heaven? Jesus has been taken from you into heaven, but someday he will return from heaven in the same way you saw him go!”

--Acts 1:11, *New Living Translation*

Jesus is coming back to put things right:

- No more war
- No more suffering
- No more death or sorrow or crying or pain , for “God will wipe every tear from their eyes.”

The ascension means that Jesus is coming back.

So there are three things the ascension means to you and me. BUT—there’s one more thing. As we remember and celebrate Jesus ascending into heaven, I have one big question:

WHY DIDN’T HE TAKE US WITH HIM?

Why does he get to go to heaven, and we have to stay down here?

The Bible and Christian tradition tell us that the purpose of our existence is to be in relationship with God. Couldn’t we do that better if he’d just take us on up?

Why did Jesus leave us on earth? He makes that incredibly clear in Acts 1:8—

⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

--Acts 1:8, *New International Version*

Jesus is coming back – but **in the meantime**, we have work to do:

There’s a world out there drowning in sorrow—and they need to know the One who said, “Peace I give to you.”

There’s a world out there drowning in hatred—and they need to know the One who said, “Love your enemies and bless those who curse you.”

There’s a world out there full of starving people and sick people and forgotten people who need to experience FROM US the one who said, “Whatever you did for the least of these, you did for me.”

Jesus is coming back – but IN THE MEANTIME, he’s given us a MISSION:

- Be my witnesses
- Preach the gospel
- Share the good news
- Make disciples

That's our mission. The question is, "What's our Vision?"

If you've been here the last couple of Sundays, or if you've read our Newsletter, you know that we at Main Street are currently in a Vision Process. And it's important to understand the difference between Mission and Vision.

Our MISSION was given to us by Jesus. He says it five different times in all four Gospels and Acts.¹ The mission never changes. It is the same for every church, at every place, in every time.

Our VISION, on the other hand, is a picture of God's future for our church. Our vision becomes clear when we understand how God is calling our church to make disciples in this place, at this time. I think of Jeremiah 29:11, where God says, "I know the plans I have for you." When we begin to understand those plans, we get a picture of the future to which God is calling us. That picture of the future is our VISION.

So:

- Our Mission is to be witnesses, to share the good news, to make disciples. That is always the same, and it will never change.
- Our Vision is a picture of how God is calling us to be witnesses in this particular place at this particular time

You know, what Main Street did in 1837, is not what Main Street was doing in 1937. And what Main Street did in 1937 is not what we're going to be doing in 2037 (which, by the way, is only 21 years away!).

The mission is always the same, but the way we carry it out changes. And what we at Main Street are doing right now is saying, "God, show us YOUR vision for how you want us to carry out the mission next."

So, how do we figure that out? How do we discern God's vision for us?

Here's how you find your vision. It works for churches, and it works for individuals. You take your two hands. With one hand, you get a firm grip on **who you are**—your gifts, talents, strengths, abilities, experiences, resources—everything you have to offer the world—everything that makes you, you.

With your other hand, get a firm grip on the **needs of the world**—especially the ones in your own backyard. What's going on out there? What are the needs that tug at your heart and keep you awake at night? You know, experts are telling us that our area, the Piedmont Triad, is the number one area in the country for food insecurity. Apparently, we've got a lot of neighbors who need food. I also think of all the school kids who need mentoring, tutoring, and supplies. And there are plenty of other needs as well.

¹ See Matthew 28:19-20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:47; John 20:21; Acts 1:8

So, with one hand you get a grip on who you are. With the other hand you get a grip on the needs of the world. And then you bring your hands together in prayer. And you ask God to show you the intersections between the needs of the world and what you have to offer. And your vision—or better said, God’s vision for you—will emerge.

The Main Street Vision Team is divided into two groups who are studying each of the two “hands.” Later this month, the internal team—the team that’s studying who we are—will be sending out a survey that you can take online, or on paper if you don’t have internet access. Please take ten minutes and fill it out. You’ll notice that it’s not a “wish list” survey that asks for all the things you wish the church would do. That’s not what we’re looking for. We’re trying to discern GOD’S VISION for the future of our church. This survey is about getting a grip on who we are as a congregation.

So let me quickly retrace this rambling journey on which I’ve taken you this morning. (How did we get from Mother’s Day to an online survey?) Today is Ascension Sunday, and the ascension of Jesus means three things:

- 1- Jesus is interceding for us
- 2- Jesus can be everywhere
- 3- Jesus is coming back

But IN THE MEANTIME – we have work to do! Jesus has given us a

MISSION
“Be my witnesses”

And because we at Main Street are committed to that, we’re praying to receive God’s

VISION
A picture of God’s Future

Let’s close by praying a prayer that the Vision Team is asking us to pray every day at 7:00 am. Set your alarm clock, set a reminder on your phone, or write yourself a note, and let’s all join together every day saying,

“Lord, help us to be all that you want us to be. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.”