

Sunday Sermon May 28, 2017

Sermon Text: Acts 1:1-14

Sermon Theme: Ascension is important!!

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach² until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.³ After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.⁴ On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about.⁵ For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”

⁶ So when they met together, they asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

⁷ He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.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.”

⁹ After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

¹⁰ They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them.¹¹ “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”

¹² Then they returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day’s walk from the city.¹³ When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James.¹⁴ They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.

We celebrate a lot of special events throughout the year. We celebrate special days like birthdays and anniversaries with special cards and cakes. We celebrate national holidays like Memorial Day and the Fourth of July with cook-outs and fireworks. We celebrate religious holidays like Christmas and Easter by going to church and worshipping during the special festival services.

But of all the celebrations we have, there is one day that we don’t celebrate very much anymore. That is Ascension Day. We don’t apologize to our friends and neighbors because we have to open Ascension Day presents. Kids don’t wake up at the crack of dawn and run into their parents’ room, “It’s Ascension day! It’s Ascension Day!” There are no Ascension Day sales, no Ascension Day parades or fireworks. We no longer even gather together for an Ascension Day service because not many people come to worship for that service.

Even though a lack of special activities or worship services might make us think that Ascension is not important, Ascension is very important and worth our celebration. Ascension is important because Jesus includes us in his plan to spread his Word and he gives us the courage and the tools to carry out his plan.

Have you been confused or frustrated because you were left out of the plan? Maybe you heard yourself say: I didn’t know that was on the schedule? When did we decide that? I must have missed that part of the plan.

There might be all sorts of reasons why we don’t know what the plan is: someone wasn’t good at sharing the plan, the plan changed and no one told you, or you just weren’t paying attention when you should have. It is very easy to become confused, uncomfortable, or even frustrated and angry when we don’t know or understand what others want us to do because we don’t know the plan.

God has plans for us and he tells us those plans. God says in Jeremiah, **“For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future.”** The future that God wants us to have, is an eternal future with him in heaven. While we walk this road to heaven on earth, he wants us to walk that road with him so that he can bless us along the way.

God’s plan extends to our whole lives and all of our actions. As we listened to Jesus’ words a few minute ago, did we hear his plans for our lives on earth? Did we hear why Ascension is so important in God’s

plan for us? Ascension is important because Jesus tells us we are an integral part of his plan to share his Word with others.

It must have felt amazing for the disciples and followers of Jesus after his resurrection. After the fear they felt at Jesus suffering and dying, he was back. Sure, it was a little different. Over these 40 days, Jesus did not travel with them from place to place, he would appear to them, give them directions and then he would be gone. But even with this difference. Jesus was back!

It seems as if the disciples and followers of Jesus were filled with so much joy at Jesus' return that they might have missed the new plan that Jesus was telling them was important. Jesus had fulfilled his Father's plan to suffer and die and now he had other work to do in heaven. His plan and purpose had changed. He would be leaving soon, and this time he would not be returning in three days.

Even though he was leaving, Jesus had a new plan for his disciples and his followers to be a part of. But he would make sure that they would know this plan. **Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. ⁵ For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."**

In true typical form, the disciples don't understand the plan. They know that Jesus is talking about something big and life-changing, but they don't grasp what that is. **Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"**

Jesus redirects their thoughts from earthly plans to heavenly ones. **It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. 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."**

Jesus' redemptive work of taking away the sins of the world was complete, he would now be ascending into heaven where his kingly work would continue in other ways. But the work of sharing and spreading that good news of forgiveness and salvation was far from done. Jesus tells them his new plan and he shows them how important they are to this plan. Jesus' plan needed people, workers to be witnesses; preaching and teaching the good news to people everywhere.

What a humbling and scary moment this must have been to a group of people who had more than likely not been far outside the borders of Israel. Galileans, as many of Jesus' disciples and followers were, were not world travelers, they were tradesman and fisherman. This would have been scary because their plans would not have included going much farther than the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Maybe they would go to Jerusalem for some festivals, but definitely not to the ends of the earth.

And yet, Jesus tells them that this is his plan for them. It is their job to go and do.

There might be some parallel between what these followers of Jesus felt and what has happened at the call days of Martin Luther College and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. The nervous graduates sit at these call day services nervously waiting for God to reveal his plans for them.

The same feelings that were in the hearts and minds of the disciples and followers of Jesus that day when he gave them this assignment is the same feelings that run through the graduates minds as well. Where will I go to witness? Where is my ministry field? Where will the Lord send me?

Some of those graduates are assigned close to home. They find that the place where the Lord will have them witness is in their own backyards. Their mission field is familiar to them. Some of Jesus' followers would witness in familiar surroundings of the homeland and hometown of Jerusalem and Judea. Their mission field of witnessing would be to their own Jewish friends and neighbors.

Others of these assignees will be assigned to places that are close to home, but are still not home. Maybe they have been to these places on trips, maybe they have friends that live here, but this is still a new place and a new mission field for them. Some of the followers of Christ would be witnessing in places that were close to their homeland, but they would travel outside of these borders and share the Gospel with their Gentile neighbors in countries around Judea like Samaria and Syria.

Then there are the other assignments that are accompanied with oohs and aahs and gasps from the assignees and their families. These young men and women are assigned to places far away from home that they have never been before, to states far away. Some of the assignees are even sent to other countries.

Many of these followers of Jesus never thought that they would go so far from home. Yet, when the persecution came, many of them fled from Jerusalem and went hundreds and thousands of miles away from

home. But they took God's Word with them and they witnessed to others of what he had done. The disciples went on missionary trips to far away nations and spread the message of Jesus to these people.

Jesus told all of his followers that day that they were his plan, they were his witnesses. He also tells all of us we are his witnesses and he sends us out as well.

How does this news make us feel to hear we are so important to Jesus' plan? Excited to be part of something? Fearful? It's easy to think that this is someone else's job to do. Not all of us go to college and are equipped with 4-8 years of Biblical training. Not all of us are able to stand in the pulpit or teach from behind the lecture. It's easy to think that the witnesses is something someone else should do for us.

Ascension is important! Jesus includes us as part of his plan, but he also shows us he has equipped us, he has given us the best tools to carry out his plan.

Jesus never said you need to be a graduate of a Christian college. He did not say you will be my seminary professors, you will be my doctrinal gurus, or you will be my guardians of theology. He said this is my plan: You will be my witnesses. You will share with others the love and forgiveness Jesus has shown to you in your life.

Jesus gives us the tools we need. The first tool is simple: faith. We are equipped witnesses when the Holy Spirit has worked faith in our hearts.

Before Jesus told the disciples his plan for them to be witnesses, he had already promised that they would be equipped to do the work. **You will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. You will be given a gift from my Father.** This same Holy Spirit that Jesus promised to give them, is the same Holy Spirit that has called us to faith, who builds us up in faith, and who helps us to share that faith with others.

Still we can still be uneasy about witnessing because we are afraid we might screw it up or do it in the wrong way.

We can learn a lot about witnessing from children. Children are often the least educated, and, it would seem by our standards, the least equipped to be witnesses. But, the Holy Spirit works in them and makes them some of the best witnesses. They sing Jesus loves me, their love of Jesus is contagious, and they tell you that you should come to church to hear about Jesus.

Children don't use lots of different types of persuasion and arguments. Their witness is simple. Because the Holy Spirit has worked faith in them which believes that Jesus is their Savior. Because they love Jesus so much, they can't wait to put the second tool into action. They can't wait to share the Good News, the Gospel that Jesus is their Savior.

Jesus Loves me this I know..... Gospel. Jesus shepherd of the sheep..... Gospel. Jesus died upon the cross for you and me..... Gospel.

Jesus has called us through the Gospel. He has given us the comfort of forgiveness and the assurance of heaven through the Gospel. Jesus doesn't ask us to take a witnessing class to know the perfect thing to say, the tool for witnessing is already part of our life because we have experienced the love of our Savior ourselves.

Ascension is important!! Jesus tells us that we have work to do. There are people to reach and he tells us that we are equipped to do the job. If it were my plan, maybe you might want more details. But this is not my plan, this is Jesus' plan. This is the job of all who call Jesus their Savior. This is our job.