

**Grace Episcopal Church**  
**May 12, 2013 – Ascension Sunday**  
**Sermon by Rev. Gloria Hopewell, D.Min.**

**Text: Acts 1: 1-11, Luke 24: 44-53**

*“On the third day, he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures,  
he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.”*

In a few minutes, we will say these words together, as we do every Sunday, confessing our faith in the words of the ancient Nicene Creed.

Some will say this, I’m sure, with all due reverence and sincere belief. Others may say it by rote, something memorized long ago in confirmation class and not deeply thought of since. Still others may say it with fingers crossed, not certain that the words make sense, not certain they believe it.

This idea of Christ’s ascension, the image in the first chapter of Acts and as it has been rendered in countless works of art, is hard for us in this time and place. In a time when our scientific knowledge of space and our universe – indeed the probability of multiple universes – has overtaken the notion of one 3-tiered universe where the earth is the center with the heavens just above and, well, that other place just below. It seems so “otherworldly” --the disciples gazing skyward as Jesus is slowly enveloped in clouds and disappears from sight.

Perhaps this is why we sometimes downplay it, even though the Ascension is a major feast of the church that actually takes place on a Thursday – exactly 40 days after the Resurrection. But do you ever wonder what it means? Why it was so important to the early church that it was put into the Creeds – the 4<sup>th</sup> century Nicene Creed and the much older Apostles Creed?

Let’s briefly trace what these eleven disciples (the twelve minus Judas) had experienced to this day, these fishermen, scribes, and tax collectors who had given up their lives and livelihoods to follow this Jesus of Nazareth through the Galilee, Samaria, and Jerusalem as he preached and taught and performed wondrous acts of healing. They were devoted to him, but didn’t ever fully understand him and his mission: we believe that they hoped he had come to overcome the powers-that-be that so oppressed the people in that out-of-the-way Roman colony.

So, his arrest, crucifixion – even his resurrection – cast them into confusion and fear, a desire to save their own skin, perhaps, and go back to their old lives. Some did start to go back, but then, there were the experiences of Jesus’ presence with them, a Jesus complete

with body, wounds and all, who taught them, ate with them, but was, well, not quite the same. He came and went in mysterious ways. Sometimes, they didn't even recognize him until he spoke or acted in some way that jogged their memories. But in these 40 days, he gave them encouragement and more teaching, preparing them for what was to come.

And today, Jesus completes that preparation. Today, Jesus gives the disciples their marching orders – to proclaim the Good News from Jerusalem to all nations, but to wait in Jerusalem to receive the power from the Holy Spirit. And then, he leaves them. It is the end of an age, a completion.

Look at the symbolism here. There is that number 40 once again! That symbolic number that indicates something exceptional – the Exodus, Noah's flood, Elijah's time in the wilderness – then Jesus' own time of temptation. And there is the cloud – recalling the pillar of cloud that led Moses and the Israelites. And then, the peculiar way of leaving the earth in a cloud was not unlike Elijah being taken up in a whirlwind.

Completion. An end. A bookend. And here, perhaps, is why the Ascension was so important to the early church. Without this the story would be open-ended. This story "bookends" the 40 days from the Resurrection. And even more, it bookends the entire Incarnation – the time from when God came in human form to share our lives, the joy and the pain. God came as a vulnerable infant, grew to manhood, and now left that earthly life in order to be present to humanity in a different way. An end. But not THE end. For it is the beginning of a new age – the age of the church. The disciples may not just continue to gaze into the heavens for there is work to be done. They must get up, go out, spread the word, and make new disciples. And through the Holy Spirit, they are led and equipped to carry on. And to pass that mission on through the generations – to us.

The trouble is, some have gotten stuck on the "other worldly." They continue to gaze into the sky and spend their time waiting for the return of Jesus on the clouds. This focus on the end times has brought us an excessive concern for the judgment – who will be saved, who will not. They are missing the point, I think.

The point is Jesus' commission to the disciples – that they would carry on his ministry, and that those they brought in – WE, the church – would continue to carry it to the ends of the earth, not gazing into the heavens but making new disciples, feeding the sheep, and working, through the Holy Spirit, to make this world a place of peace, joy, and equity. Having the courage to stand against the powers and principalities, the institutions on behalf of the powerless and weak. And waiting. Waiting in worship and prayer to be filled and equipped by the Spirit.

We live in a broken world. A world where watching the news is often overwhelming. We might wonder how we – one person, one church – can make a difference in the face of so much despair. And yet, it happens. In the midst of the bad news, there are glimpses of light and life. It might be the person who is honored for a life of selfless volunteerism. Or

it might be the day-to-day witness of caring that each one of us makes as we go about our daily routines. It might be something that garners national attention like this past week, when neighbors dared to intervene and freed the three women kidnapped, confined, and abused for more than ten years.

Or it might be a smaller thing like encouraging and supporting young people in the community. Something like that happened here at Grace on Friday night. It was the opening of the high school art exhibit. Grace provided the space, the reception – and matting and framing the art works for display. Grace also provided conversation with the young artists, their families, and their teacher. Who knows but that this brief event might make a lasting difference in one young life.

The last verses in Luke's Gospel today are reflected in the window here above the altar. Do you see? Jesus' hands are stretched out in blessing to the disciples. And they went to the Temple blessing God. Let us, too, not stay too long looking into the sky. Let us look at each other and all in our world who are in such need of blessing. Spread it around!

Amen and amen.

*Note: a sermon is an oral act and art, not primarily a document or manuscript. It is, therefore, to the extent possible, written as it will be spoken, not as a composition teacher might expect. In addition, there are undoubtedly modifications made in the preaching moment which might not be represented here.*