

Grace Episcopal Church
June 1, 2014
Sermon by Rev. Gloria Hopewell, D.Min.

Text: Acts 1: 6-14

Have you ever wondered what was going through the disciples' minds? What they were thinking as Jesus said his final goodbye and was lifted up and out of their sight? You know, we talk a lot about what their thoughts and feelings might have been at other times--in that upper room where they were hiding after Jesus' crucifixion, for example. At the table in Emmaus, or the beach where Jesus met them that early morning for breakfast. And even before the crucifixion--in more ordinary times--walking and talking with Jesus, listening to his teachings, observing his healing. But at what we have come to call his Ascension? Not so much, I think.

Is it because this is such an ethereal scene--supernatural, really, as the writer of Luke and Acts portrays it? In the Gospel, he says, "Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven." And in Acts, as Jesus finishes speaking to them, "as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight." The scene is rendered in just that way in works of art--Jesus levitating, feet dangling beneath his robe, sailing slowly into the air. Is that why we don't probe and examine this story in the same way we do others? Do we pass by it quickly because it is beyond rational understanding in a time that we don't generally think of God being "up there" somewhere beyond the clouds?

Well, I've been wondering this week. It seemed to me that the disciples should have been ready for this moment. Jesus had told them what was coming--that he would be

leaving them, but not leaving them comfortless. And in these 40 days since the Resurrection--40 days that represent "completion," the completion of his ministry on earth--he had appeared to them and stayed with them giving the final instruction, preparing them for their ongoing work and ministry. There should have been hugs and goodbyes, shaking hands, perhaps, and wishing each other well, then the disciples heading off to plan how to carry on their new roles and responsibilities. But instead, after Jesus' blessing and lifting off we see his friends just standing there, staring up into an empty sky, seemingly as clueless as they were often portrayed throughout the years they were with Jesus!

I think we have a hint that they were still clueless. In this morning's reading from Acts, they gather together and say to Jesus, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" "Is this the time....?" Hmmm.

So do you suppose that through all of the drama, the devastating grief of the crucifixion, the joy and amazement of the Resurrection, the mystery of Jesus' presence with them in his wounded bodily form--and yet different--they still, deep down, had a long held expectation? The expectation that Jesus, the Messiah, would, here and now, overturn the Roman authority and oppression, and restore the kingdom of David? That Jesus had one last surprise for them, and this would be the moment?

Oh, he had a surprise for them all right, though it probably should not have been so surprising. If they had been listening. If they had been able to understand. Jesus did what he said he would do. He completed his earthly ministry and returned to God. After telling them to wait for the power of the Holy Spirit and then to be His witnesses, not just in Jerusalem, but to the very ends of the earth! It took the two men in white to tell them they were wasting their time gazing up toward the heavens and send them back, once again, to that upper room in Jerusalem.

Last week, Marsha shared her wonderful story of discerning whether her call to ministry

was truly from God. Most of us who have followed that winding path to ordained ministry relate to that very well. It is not an easy task to separate the thoughts and desires and fears in our minds and hearts and be certain that we are hearing the voice of God. So, maybe we should be relieved and even encouraged that it was hard, too, for these disciples even though they had Jesus right there with them, talking to them directly and in their own language. Yet, even with that advantage, it was hard for them to understand what they were called to do. Partly because they had some preconceived notions that didn't seem to match the reality. And because they had desires of how they wanted things to be: Jesus continuing to be within touching distance, continuing to lead them and teach them--or be on a throne, ruling the land. Not leaving them behind to await this Holy Spirit, this Advocate, whatever that would be. Not expecting them to discern what they were to be and to do--and then going out as if they had authority and knew what to do and how to do it!

It is not only these disciples, is it? It is not only those who are ordained. It is each and every one of us. It is our churches. We all have preconceived notions. We all have desires and wishes that get in the way of hearing God's voice. Maybe it happens when we pray but let our own desired outcomes shut off the listening. Maybe it happens when we cling to what has been and don't leave room for what can be.

There are, as we know, some Christian traditions that seem to continue staring into space--waiting for the "rapture." Waiting for a better life to come--and racking up brownie points for that time. They live as though this life is just to be endured, to be gotten through before going on to the "real" life where all is happy ever after.

But that's not what it is about. It is about here. About now. We are told that Jesus had to depart in order for the Holy Spirit to come. In order for the new age--the age of the Church--to dawn. I've always asked, "Who said?" "Why does that need to be true?" "Why can't we have both?"

It needs to be true, I think, because those two folk in white asked why the disciples were just standing there sky gazing. Like them--those closest to Jesus and those men and women in his wider circle--we are to quit gazing skyward, and pray. The Acts passage says that "All these [the twelve minus Judas, Jesus' brothers, and certain women] were constantly devoting themselves to prayer."

The Gospel of Luke says that "they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God." And they waited for the Holy Spirit.

Like all of these, we come to church each Sunday to worship and hear the word. Not just to become enlightened. Not to be entertained--this is not a Stanley Cup play-off game for Heaven's sake! But to be touched by the Word in our hearts, our minds, and our souls. To pray, to worship, to listen--and then to be witnesses to the Word--in the way that we live our individual lives and as the Church. Witness in this world. Right here. Right now.