

**Grace Episcopal Church, Galena IL**  
**May 24, 2015 – Ascension Sunday**  
**Sermon by Rev. Gloria Hopewell, D.Min.**

**Text: Acts 2: 1-11, John 15: 26-26; 16: 4b-15**

When we left the disciples last week—in the last episode of the Easter story—they were gazing skyward as Jesus ascended back to God, ending his earthly ministry. We can imagine them watching for a while until someone said, “Well, we might as well be on our way.” And taking one last look, they made their way back to Jerusalem, through the city gates, and to an upper room. Possibly the same room that had left not so very long ago.

But what a difference from that time! Then, they huddled together in fear and confusion in the immediate aftermath of Jesus’ horrifying death, not knowing what to do, where to turn, what would become of them.

This day, though, they followed Jesus’ last instructions to them, returning to Jerusalem in “great joy,” and Luke tells us that “they were continually in the temple blessing God” as they awaited what he had promised, the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, who would give them the power they needed to go forth in Christ’s name.

In this episode—yes, episode—it is an essential part of the Easter story, after all, if, indeed, we believe that the Resurrection is not end but a new beginning. In this episode, they rejoice and pray together. There is no sign of grief and sorrow. I can’t help but find this change in them rather amazing. They have, after all, just said goodbye to their friend, their teacher, their constant companion knowing that this time, he would not immediately be back, walking the roads of Galilee and Judea, sharing laughter and stories and meals, astonishing—even shocking—those around him with unusual ways of teaching and healing.

In just a matter of days, they have gone from a pack of often clueless followers who had denied Jesus, abandoned him to the disciples he had gathered and formed, now eager for what was to come. Wow. Wouldn’t you love to know how Jesus accomplished this transformation? Maybe those days between the Resurrection and the Ascension were like a kind of capstone course in a master’s program: where all the individual elements, what had been learned and experienced along the way, finally began to coalesce and make sense. The parables that Jesus used, turning the world they knew upside down with new insight. The healings—even on the Sabbath. The confrontations with religious leaders over rigid adherence to the “letter of the Law” rather than love. The miracles and the serious moments where he told them what was to come—the things they just couldn’t

grasp at the time. But now, combined with their trust in him, in his promise, they were ready, transformed.

And, just as Jesus said, the Holy Spirit came to them—in the midst of a major religious festival when Jerusalem was teeming with the faithful from all over their known world, all of those named in this morning’s reading from Acts. A spring harvest festival that also recognized the giving of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai. What an appropriate time to stir things up! And this. This was not a soft and gentle touch or laying on of hands. No, this was sheer power: the rush of a mighty wind, tongues of fire sweeping through the crowds—dangerous, scorching hot, uncontrollable.

In his weekly commentary, David Lose (formerly of Luther Seminary, now Dean of the Lutheran Seminary in Pennsylvania), tells us that “Paraclete,” the Greek word for “Holy Spirit” used in John’s Gospel, literally means, “to come alongside another.” We tend to translate that as “Comforter” or “Advocate.” As these images in our readings today indicate, though, it is more than that: the Paraclete is “the one who comes along side us to encourage, equip, strengthen, provoke and, yes, at times to comfort us so that we can get out there and do it all again.” And the Paraclete was not only for the disciples but for us:

if we heed the word and work of the coming-along-side Holy Spirit, he says, we will inevitably be pushed beyond what we imagine and end up stirring things up. We tend to think of the Holy Spirit as the answer to a problem, but what if the Spirit’s work is to create for us a new problem: that we have a story to tell, mercy to share, love to spread, and we just can’t rest until we’ve done so!

As far as I can tell, nowhere in the New Testament does Jesus command us to go out and build churches, take care of old buildings, and devote yourself to crumbling institutions. No, Jesus says “go and make disciples” and “when you care for the least of these you are caring for me” and “love one another as I have loved you.” And this kind of work is inherently disruptive, difficult, and at times even dangerous.

A number of you know Matt Gunter, now the Bishop of Fond du Lac. He likens the Holy Spirit to the electric fences on his family’s farm when he was growing up.

That first generation of the Church was not energized by some new religious insight. Nor were they energized by some new ethical ideal. They were energized by the power of Spirit of God – the same Spirit that had descended upon Jesus and that he had promised to pass on to his followers. The current of that Spirit electrified them with the love, peace, joy, and hope of Jesus. Empowered by his Holy Spirit, Peter and the others were transformed and became transformers who shocked the world, turning it upside down with the power of the good news of what God had done and was doing through Jesus the Christ.

The Church is like an electric grid, charged through with the Holy Spirit....The Holy Spirit is given to us personally primarily through that connection. So connected, individuals are energized and empowered by the love and joy of Jesus. As we learn to love in community, participate in worship and sacraments, pray, study scripture and serve we are continually energized and recharged by that same Spirit. Like the Apostles before us, we too are charged with the spiritual electricity of new life, new creation.

Brother Tristram of the Society of St. John the Evangelist, and Episcopal brotherhood in Boston, talks about life in the Spirit, the everlasting life that Jesus promised the disciples—and us. He uses the sail boat to explain how we take part in this life:

We don't have to earn it, or deserve it, he says, – that's like expecting the sail boat to propel itself. The sail boat simply has to extend its sails and allow the wind to fill them, and away it goes.

There are so many images to help us sense the incredible power of the Spirit. And they serve the point of reminding us that this day is not just about an ancient time when the church was born. It continues now, and we should probably pay more attention. We call ourselves "Easter people," the people of the Resurrection. But that is only part of the story. We must be "Pentecost people" who live in the Spirit. Who rejoice and pray. Who are ever growing in our love for God and one another. Whose lives testify to the promise of Jesus. Brother Tristram continues,

And so the invitation to us this morning, this Pentecost morning, is to 'open our sails.' That is always a risk, because God's spirit sometimes takes us where we don't want to go. Once the wind of the spirit catches us the journey may be scary. God may take us to places where we don't feel comfortable, where we shall need all our courage and fortitude. So, a warning. God has a habit of answering our prayers. Be careful what you ask for. Don't pray, "Come Holy Spirit, my soul inspire" unless you mean it! Don't pray, "Breathe on me breath of God" unless you are prepared for the consequences. Those first disciples had their lives turned upside down by the divine power invading them. For them the gift of the Holy Spirit changed their lives forever.

If you dare to say 'yes' to the prompting of God's Spirit in your heart, if you follow where God seems to be calling you, you won't be spared trials and hardships along the way, but you will discover what it is to be alive, truly alive in Christ. And this life is for all eternity.

Amen.

