

NEW TESTAMENT READING: Acts; 1:6-14 pg 118 NT

6 So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” 7 He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” 9 When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10 While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. 11 They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” 12 Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day’s journey away. 13 When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. 14 All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

GOSPEL READING: John 17:20-24 pg 111 NT

²⁰“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us,^[a] so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²²The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, ²³I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. ²⁴Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

PSALM: Psalm 97 pg 551 OT

The Lord is king! Let the earth rejoice; let the many coastlands be glad! 2 Clouds and thick darkness are all around him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne. 3 Fire goes before him, and consumes his adversaries on every side. 4 His lightnings light up the world; the earth sees and trembles. 5 The mountains melt like wax before the Lord, before the Lord of all the earth. 6 The heavens proclaim his righteousness; and all the peoples behold his glory. 7 All worshipers of images are put to shame, those who make their boast in worthless idols; all gods bow down before him. 8 Zion hears and is glad, and the towns of Judah rejoice, because of your judgments, O God. 9 For you, O Lord, are most high over all the earth; you are exalted far above all gods. 10 The Lord loves those who hate evil; he guards the lives of his faithful; he rescues them from the hand of the wicked. 11 Light dawns for the righteous, and joy for the upright in heart. 12 Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous, and give thanks to his holy name!

“For the Time Being”

Up, up and away. That is the direction of the story of the Ascension. There is a real movement toward the skies. It is a second Easter, so to speak, with its triumph over the natural order and a promise of great things to come. On Easter, Jesus rose from the dead, then returned to spend 40 days and nights teaching his disciples on earth. And then, Luke says, Jesus returned to Glory from whence he came to sit at the right hand of the Father’s throne. He went up...up, up and away into heaven.

Now, despite the fact that *heaven* is more a concept rather than a reality, a relationship, an attitude more than a geographic place beyond the clouds, the imaginations of poets, composers, artists and preachers have for centuries been flung wide with a plethora of beautiful words, soaring notes and colorful images describing it and describing Jesus’ going up into it. And you know, this is just fine for it allows heaven to become for us the “spiritual place”, the symbolic location for our future destiny, the “better country” of fulfilled promises that it was intended to be. The Right Rev. Peter Gomes of Harvard University says, *“On holy days like the Ascension, the imagination and the heart are necessary to faith. They are the things by which vision is enlarged and life, as a consequence, is made not simply more bearable but even redeemed. In this sense theology is but the maidservant of faith; it is to belief what grammar is to speech, each a means to the glorious end of communication. So, I celebrate Ascension with its three-decker universe and its language and images as some of the few but necessary means of liberating us from the bondage and tyranny of analysis and sensibility.”* Yes, wonder and awe ARE holy things. So today, we set our imaginations free with the vision of heaven and Jesus ascending to it, and we are reminded of all the promises that God has made to us.

Rev. Gomes goes on, *“We need embrace the mystery of faith, we rejoice in the promises of God, and we follow Jesus **as best we can**, not simply in what he tells us to do, but also to that place where he has gone. **The triumph, the glory, the kingship, and the dominion are all God’s AND are all ours, for we are Gods as well.**”¹ (repeat)* That promise you’ve heard said

¹ Peter Gomes. *Ascension. The Absent and the Present Christ*. In: *Sermons Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living*. (New York: William Morrow & Co, Inc; 1998), 92-96.

before not nearly so eloquently, but often enough that you probably can say it with me, *“What belongs to Jesus belongs to us.”* It’s what those disciples must have been coming to understand during those 40 days that Jesus was with them. *“Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live,”* he told them. (Jn 14:19).

But Jesus also told them that he was going ahead to prepare a place for them....a mansion with many rooms, he described (Jn 14:3), and indeed, one day, *“as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.”* He went on without them. He left them! And Luke tells us that *“while he was going, they were gazing up toward heaven.”* Of course, they were. There’s a famous painting of the Ascension with the apostles looking up, mouths open, staring at Jesus’ feet as he disappeared out of sight. Can you imagine what they were feeling? They must have been filled with amazement, but at the same time ENORMOUS sadness and fear. It seems almost cruel that Jesus was taken away from them again.

And then, *“two men in white robes stood by them.”* They said, *“Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?”* In other words, *“What are ya doin’? “Get busy” “There’s work to do”!* The angels were asking a rhetorical question if even a question. It was actually more of a poke with a cattle prod. Rev. Gomes once again: *“Consternation, wonder, and awe are not luxuries in the economy of salvation, they are necessities, but they are not, in and of themselves, sufficient!”*² No, they aren’t. The disciples would have liked to rise up with Jesus right then, but for the time being, there was work to be done. For the time being they were to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria and to the ends of earth. They were to be his body in the world. They were to, through their unity and love, bring others to know that HE sent them. This was what they were to be busy doing for the time being.

We’re told elsewhere that the disciples went back to Jerusalem with JOY. They spent the next days, fasting and praying as they waited for the Holy Spirit to empower them for the work. I can almost imagine smiles starting to creep over their faces as they walked, can’t you? I can

² Peter Gomes.

almost hear them laughing with excitement and see their walk turned into a run back to the upper room in Jerusalem where they could breathlessly tell the others what they'd seen.

So, brothers and sisters...for the time being, is this not our charge too? We live in "the already but not yet", and we are to be Christ's witnesses to the ends of the earth, Christ's body doing his work, the love-ly work of the Kingdom...down here....on earth. *There is a great story of a statue of Christ found by some soldiers during recovery work after WWII. It was damaged following the bombing of a church. Both of Jesus' hands on his outstretched arms had been severed off. Sculptors offered to replace the missing hands, but after deliberation, church leaders decided to leave the statue without hands as a message that the work of Jesus is done through us. A sign was placed at the statue's feet which referred to the poem by St. Teresa of Avila: "Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours, Yours are the eyes through which to look out Christ's compassion to the world, Yours are the feet with which he goes about doing good."*³

Now, we all know that there are times when the joy of doing Christ's work can be a little hard to come by....when the work can be formidable and overwhelming, when it can seem like just a drop in the bucket. Despair or anger can grip us when we see life not valued, when truth and justice aren't regarded as virtues, when compassion is opposed to heavy handed power, and humility is uniformly regarded as a sign of weakness... when so, so many around us seem to be suffering. It's hard. It's hard. And joy is scarce when influences seem to lure us to look the other way or tell us that withdrawing or being suspicious of brokenness of the world is the REASONABLE thing to do. *When this apathy or despair or fear begins to creep in on me, and it does, I have drawn strength from the story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the gentle pacifist preacher who in the 1940's found himself, by virtue of being a Christian in his time, in the middle of the Resistance in Germany. He realized his circumstances and his choices, and became part of the plot to kill Hitler. The plot failed and he was arrested and executed just days before the end of the war. From his prison cell, he wrote numerous letters, letters which*

³ P. Pitterle. "Christ Has No Hands But Ours" <http://pitterlepostings.blogspot.com/2009/12/christ-has-no-hands-but-ours.html> (accessed 7-18-15).

he could not have known would influence countless Christians since. In one, he said,

“Christianity doesn’t shield us from life, but plunges us into all the dimension of it...I’ve come to appreciate the worldliness of Christianity...It is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith and throw oneself completely into the arms of God.”⁴

Brothers and sisters, I know you know this....I know FPC-CC does... but be reminded today that even an ordinary hug or card can convey Christ’s unbounded love and blessing. Even the smallest donation of food or money can sometimes result in life rather than death. A simple act of kindness when the world seems so cruel can transform. A gentle smile given on a dreary day, a minute spent listening when no one else will, soft words of encouragement which drown noisy or bullying insults ... all of these can mediate the divine. And when we do what furthers the Kingdom for those who are put in our path on any given day in our circumstances... when we, as Rev. Gomes says, *“follow Jesus **as best we can**, not simply in what he tells us to do but also eventually to that place where he has gone,”* well, then we have served as Christ’s hands and feet, eyes and ears in this world.

So, for the time being, let’s consider what work burns in our hearts to do in the world. And let’s together, get busy, no, let’s keep busy doing it, always remembering that the Spirit of the One who now sits in Glory, at the right hand of the Father, goes with us. And THAT, THAT SHOULD make make ya’ smile. Amen and Amen.

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *Letters and Papers from Prison*” (New York: SCM Press, Ltd.;1997), 368-9.