

Lake Shore Baptist Church Sermon May 24, 2020 Charlie Fuller

Text: Acts 1:6-14

Title: Waiting and Watching

This week Cindy saw a Facebook meme and shared it with me. It said, "Today we celebrate Jesus' Ascension. If you're not sure what that is, it's when Jesus started working from home."

Think about what some of the disciples had seen so far:

They'd seen Jesus shine like he was radioactive while in the presence of Moses and Elijah on a mountaintop. We call it the Transfiguration. They'd seen Jesus calm a man who had been violently insane for years. They'd seen Jesus heal lepers and paralytics, people with withered hands and withered legs and withered eyes. They'd seen an ocean tempest calmed on his command. They'd seen Jesus die on a cross and then show up along the road and join them for dinner.

And then Jesus is somehow sucked up into a cloud and taken out of their sight.

It's a bit mind blowing. Indeed, how can anyone be sure what the story of Jesus' Ascension is all about?

Let's start with the disciples' question at the beginning of the story. They asked, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"

The disciples still don't get it. They're still looking for a restoration of earthly power, influence, and authority. Many of us still don't get it even today. Religious leaders, even so very many who claim the name of Jesus, are still looking for earthly power, influence, and authority. They might as well stand in their pulpits and quote this Scripture as their own: "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to us evangelicals?" "Lord, is this the time when we can implement our political agenda? Lord, is this the time when we can build a wall not just to keep out people we don't like, but ideas we don't like? Lord, is this the time you've granted for us to build a wall around our country to keep out change? So that we can go back to that mythical time when the values of conservative Christianity ruled our nation?"

No, the original disciples were not the only ones that didn't understand that the coming of Jesus wasn't about political power and cultural hegemony.

But let's not think that those of us who don't identify with conservative, cultural Christianity are somehow immune to this same temptation. We live in a world where civic engagement is right and proper and necessary. But we dare not put our *ultimate* trust in political positions – liberal or conservative. When we do, we're following voices other than those of Jesus. When our politics – left or right – bring us to violate Jesus' ultimate and effusive and complete example of grace, we're not participating in God's new order of the Spirit, revealed in Jesus.

And yet, while the disciples' political expectations were not going to be fulfilled, the writer of Acts does give us a hint that something incredible was coming. Jesus was leaving, but God's work would continue, maybe not in the way they kept wanting, but in a way and with power they couldn't begin to imagine. They just had to wait for the Spirit to come. We'll spend some more time on the Spirit next week as we celebrate Pentecost, the coming of Holy Spirit, and God's new order of the Spirit.

So, Jesus has been taken up in a cloud. I've never seen that. Have you? It must have been an incredible experience, a remarkable thing to behold. So, how did the disciples respond? Did they respond by taking up arms to overthrow the government? Did they respond by trying to take over the Temple, to assert power, influence, and authority?

Let's look very carefully at what they did. They went back to Jerusalem. They got on with their life *together*. And a key word here is "together." They gathered together with each other. The men AND the women. The Scripture writer was careful to specifically mention that the women were there, too. *They were inclusive, not exclusive.* They were all looking to get on with this life molded in the shape of Jesus. They didn't know what it would look like, but it seems clear that they were beginning to understand that it wasn't about political power. It was about something much more transformative than mere political power. God's new order of the Spirit was coming.

And while we don't know all that they did together, we know that they *devoted* themselves to prayer. *Devoted* is a pretty powerful word. We talk about being devoted to our spouses, our responsibilities, our families. Beyond that, devotion is not really considered to be too cool. In our culture, we're too enamored with what is new, whether it's things, ideas, or even people. We live in a disposable culture. We want the newest goods, the latest fashions, the newest entertainment, the latest technology, the latest ideas. And that thinking can infect our ideas about faith.

When the disciples, both men and women, didn't know what else to do, when they couldn't figure out what was next, they went back to basics. They went back to lives of prayer. During this season of COVID-19, I hear people say this phrase over and over: "I don't know." I don't know what to do. I don't know what to think. I don't know what's the right way to respond. The disciples didn't know, either. Maybe we would be well advised to follow the disciples' example and dedicate ourselves to lives of devotion, to lives of prayer.

When I think of the Ascension, I think of it as a marker of transition, sort of a fulcrum in time. Jesus was here and then he was gone, at least physically. And coming again. But coming again at a time that Jesus himself said we can't know.

We live in this time of transition; we live in both the "already" and the "not yet." God's Kingdom is both here already and yet still to come. We live in an "in between" time. We can see evidence that God's Kingdom is here. We see goodness in the world. But we also see much in the world that is broken. There's no doubt that the redemption of the

world is incomplete. We long for the return of Jesus and the completion of God's work, even if we can't know when that will be.

So, we watch. And we wait. But we watch and wait not as those who have no hope. We watch and we wait expectantly, hopefully, in trust and with all the patience we can muster. God has called us to wait and God has given us this example of the early disciples of *how* to wait.

We know with certainty that they did two things: They stayed together and they prayed. Surely, we can do both of those things as we wait as patiently as we can for this pandemic to recede. And surely, we can do both of those things as we wait on the redemption of God's world.

Stay together and pray. It's not complicated, but it's not easy. May our prayers be the glue that will continue to bind us together.

In Jesus' name.

Amen.