



Looking for the Living One in a Cemetery

Ascension of the Lord
29 May 2022

Ascension Lutheran Church
Rev. Christian W. Marien

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

For the past three weeks, I have struggled to see clearly. I know, I know – my eyes are beginning to age. BUT! Not so much that my vision cannot be made perfect with the help of glasses. I smiled last Sunday when Pastor Tony wore his reading glasses for the first time while preaching. Good for Pastor Tony! I will fight those as long as possible – printing my sermon in larger font until I have a book of pages for a sermon. But why in these past three weeks have I struggled so much. And then I realized that when I wore my glasses – I had no problem. But my contacts. It turns out for the past three weeks I had reversed my contacts. So I was wearing my left contact in my right eye and my right contact in my left eye. Which meant I could see – for the most part – I just could not see clearly. Faces, billboards, speed limit signs – I could see them but I could not understand them. Welcome to the world of the disciples today.

On this day that we celebrate the Ascension of Jesus into heaven. Just before Jesus disappeared from their sight, he left the disciples with these words: “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.”

After all the weeks and months and more the disciples have spent with Jesus during his public ministry prior to his resurrection, and now after 40 days with Jesus *after* the resurrection, we might think the disciples would be starting to catch on, that they’d have at least a decent understanding of what Luke calls “the scriptures.” But they don’t. They’re still confused and mixed up and doubtful — joyful, yes, but “in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering.” (And so even here, in his very last moments with them before his ascension, Jesus is still their teacher: *Let’s go over this one more time...* He “opens their minds to understanding the scriptures” — which is to say, prior to this eleventh-hour moment, even after all they’d been through, the disciples’ minds were still closed. Perhaps we should not be so hard on ourselves, for our own doubts and questions in our life of faith.

You are witnesses. We forget the power of what we know. What we have heard. What we have seen. We are witnesses. And there is power in our witness. So much power that we have a calling on our lives to stand in that witness. Our witness begins with a cross and a grave. Our witness begins with resurrection. We stand in witness of God’s revealed power in the risen Jesus. We stand in the promise of hope and the power of love. We also stand to witness the difficult and painful moments in our world. I have witnessed these things and so have many of you. And if not with our own eyes, we have been told by others who have witnessed these things.

This day we stand to give witness to the loss of life in Uvalde, Texas. Candles keep vigil on our altar. More candles than we can count. More candles than we should have to light. Truly if we must light even one candle for a child or teacher who has died while going to school – it is too much. It is not the first school shooting – it will, I am afraid, not be the last. I make no space, at least not yet, for the young man who entered the Robb Elementary School last Wednesday – but in time we will have to offer some solace to parents and families. If we cannot answer the question of “why” then we will need to be able to speak to the emptiness and grief with a word of hope that change will come. We stand to give witness to the need for change in our obsession with violence and anger, while coming to terms with our inability to provide meaningful ways for young and old to cope with being overwhelmed or in such despair that only a solution of violence will mean a welcome peace most often in death. We stand to give witness for countless citizens of Ukraine who have died for no other reason than in defense of their country for another’s greed. We stand to give witness for more than two years of lives lost to the Covid pandemic. We stand to give witness to the brutality that ended the life of George Floyd on a street in downtown Minneapolis as the second anniversary of his murder has come and gone. We stand to give witness to this 154th Memorial Day. To more wars than we can remember. To more lives lost than we should forget. I still remember the story my mother told of my grandfather’s first visit to Pearl Harbor. My grandfather served in the China, Burma, India Theatre. Years later when my grandparents took their first



Looking for the Living One in a Cemetery

Ascension of the Lord
29 May 2022

Ascension Lutheran Church
Rev. Christian W. Marien

trip to Hawaii, they visited the Pearl Harbor Memorial. It is a beautifully peaceful place in the middle of the harbor. The building above water straddles the USS Arizona below the surface. When you enter the memorial they remind you that you are visiting sacred ground. And when my grandfather walked into the small room, on one side, where they have listed the names of every member of the armed forces who died at Pearl Harbor, he began to weep as he read the names of high school classmates and neighbors and friends. We stand as witnesses that in war, there may be an outcome of peace, but at incredible cost. Yes, we are witnesses to these things.

And also: We are witnesses to a rich life lived in more wondrous ways than we can imagine. We are witnesses to a world where we can give thanks to God for the healing of disease. We are witnesses to a time where we can communicate around the world in a matter of seconds. We are witnesses to a world where we are able, every-so-often, to see the very best of who we are in the actions of our sisters and brothers throughout the world who tend the broken, the fearful, the ones left to fend for themselves. In this time and place we are witnesses to a future, of what the world could look like, if only we saw each other as human beings worthy of care and respect and space and love. In other words, in small but powerful ways, every day in Jerusalem the disciples were witnesses to resurrection—if only their eyes were open to see it. We are witnesses to the feeding of the hungry, the visiting of the sick, the freedom of the oppressed – if only in small ways until we can speak to the powerful witness of the time when all are fed, and all are free. My friends, every day in Waukesha, Mukwonago, West Allis, Milwaukee, Oconomowoc, Pewaukee, and Wauwatosa we are witness to resurrection—if only our eyes are open to see it. If only our mouths were brave enough to proclaim it.

Hear again the Good News: As Jesus ascended into heaven to be with the Father, Jesus said: You are witnesses of these things. What a responsibility. And what an opportunity. Dear friends in Christ, dear people of the Resurrection: Whether you are in Jerusalem or this holy city of Waukesha. You are witnesses. You have stories to tell. You have hope to proclaim. You have love to share. You are witnesses because you have seen the Risen Lord. You have met him in the words of Scripture. You have met him on the streets of the city. You have known him in the breaking of bread and sharing of wine. You have seen him on Easter morning where we visited an empty tomb, heard women tell us the news, and proclaimed together, “Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!” You are witnesses of these things. And so today, on this mountain where Jesus ascended to the Father, we witnesses do not gather to mourn that we are alone. We celebrate that we are together! We rejoice that we have been given a voice, to proclaim what we have seen and known! We know the power of life over death, of resurrection over grave, of eternal life over the supposed finality of death. We have seen the Lord.

It took me three weeks to figure out my vision was clouded by my own lack of care and attention as to which contact went into which eye. I blamed the doctor who wrote the prescription. I blamed the tech on the phone who must have told me the wrong information about my prescription. I might have blamed a child for messing with my contact case. In the end, my carelessness was the cause of my inability to see. Imagine God offering to me all that I need to see clearly and me being too stubborn, too impatient to take a step back to see my situation more clearly.

I read the reading from Luke out of the Message translation of the Bible today. The story of the Ascension of Jesus into heaven is included in the larger section of Luke 24 which begins with the resurrection of Jesus and the women’s visit to an empty tomb. Often in Bibles the translator gives a title to an important section. Before this chapter begins, the title reads: “Looking for the Living One in a Cemetery! I had intended to preach about looking for the living among the dead. That is, after all, what we are always trying to do – expecting in this life that when we witness the power of death that we also witness the end of the story. And yet, there is Jesus – calling, claiming, coming to us – the Living One in a Cemetery of life we often do not want to leave. Believing that in death we will find meaning and purpose, when instead Jesus meets us in the cemeteries of our lives and calls us out. Jesus calls us to life! Jesus calls us to see clearly the suffering in this life and



Looking for the Living One in a Cemetery

Ascension of the Lord
29 May 2022

Ascension Lutheran Church
Rev. Christian W. Marien

stand in witness of hope. Jesus calls us to stand in witness of resurrection. Yes, People of God, we are witnesses of these things. It is our story to tell. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Now, don't forget it! Amen.