

Reflection: The Ascension

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

There is an ongoing internet conversation happening where people are completely confused as to which day we are currently living in. I know the struggle. If, I have a conversation with my neighbor and say, “Well, it is only Monday,” it is quite possible that my neighbor will look at me strangely and then say, “Chris, it is Wednesday.” To which I will return their strange stare and say, “Really?” Add to that conversation that the daily routine of school happens around iPads in bedrooms and on couches and now with Fridays off from school in Waukesha – the days start to blend together. And then, add to that conversation a schedule where “working from home” means any time between 8am and 9pm any day of the week based on when someone calls or a video meeting is scheduled. Then top it off with pre-recording Sunday worship on Thursday afternoon and I realize that I should not wonder why I am having trouble remembering what day of the week I am currently living in.

And if you think days of the week are hard, then join me in keeping track of seasons of the church year. We just finished the season of Easter – 50 days of celebration. Today we gather to celebrate the Ascension of Jesus into heaven. And next Sunday, well if you have a JOLT student in your home – ask them if they know what season is next – the hint is that the next church season begins with the letter “P.” And no, it is not the “season of the pandemic.” We have been living there far too long already. No, Pentecost is coming – the gifting of the Holy Spirit to the world – but that is next week. This week, today, Jesus leads the disciples and all of us out of Jerusalem to the village of Bethany at the Mount of Olives. And just maybe you feel like you have been here before. In truth, you have.

The Mount of Olives is the place where the story of Jesus “begins again in new ways” if you will. The Mount of Olives is where Jesus stays with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in the village of Bethany on the eastern slope of the mountain. It is the place where we will hear Jesus shout, “Lazarus come out,” when Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead and begins the most public unveiling of God’s greatest power and promise for the world – resurrection. It is the place where Mary will kneel in worship before Jesus and anoint his feet with perfume of pure nard and dry his feet with her hair beginning his journey of preparation for the day of his burial. The Mount of Olives will host the beginning of the last week of the life of Jesus as he rides a donkey from the Mount of Olives through the Kidron Valley and into the gates of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday to begin the last week of his earthly life. The Mount is where Jesus will tell the disciples of signs and wonders and the destruction of Jerusalem – reminding the disciples to wait for the master’s coming; sharing news of what it means to be the wise and faithful servant; and explaining the joys of being a servant of God who uses God-given resources wisely – beginning to help the disciples to live by the example Jesus offers as Jesus knows that the cross is not so far off in the distance. And finally, on the western slope of the Mount of Olives, Jesus will begin his final night of prayer and struggle in the Garden of Gethsemane.

And now, this day, Jesus returns to the Mount of Olives with his disciples to “open their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, ‘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. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.’ 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 they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.”

Is it any wonder that we feel like we have been here before to this exact spot on this same mountain? Here, overlooking Jerusalem, we find ourselves once again on holy ground. And for me, the good news this day, is the reminder that each of us stands on holy ground – saturated with God’s presence – washed and refreshed with the water of life. “You are witnesses of these things,” Jesus tells us this day. Death, resurrection, repentance,

forgiveness – proclaimed in the name of our Savior Jesus. We are witnesses of these things. We have seen this life-changing God come among us – in the manger, at the Jordan River, in our homes around tables, present at our bedsides in hospital and home, tending us in our anxiety, our fear, our pride, our anger, and our love and care for others. And if the story of the Ascension of Jesus into heaven teaches me anything – I learn that Jesus does not leave me, does not leave us, without the promise and power of our God. And though I know the deep well of God’s promise and power will never run dry, I know that there are days – even these days – where I forget to drink from that well – where the water of life refreshes and renews. And then I need to be reminded that when I cannot come to the well myself – my God promises to come to me. The prophet Isaiah tells us: how beautiful on the mountain are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, and who bring good news of happiness, who proclaims salvation, and says to Zion, “Your God reigns!” Even in the midst of these days. Mr. Rogers, of children’s television fame, shared the line, “Look for the helpers.” It is a comfort in these days. But today, and in the days ahead, I wish to look for the beautiful feet that bring the good news of God’s presence and light. And those beautiful feet that bring good news come as pastors (most of the time I hope), neighbors, family members, friends, first responders, health care workers, musicians, artists, teachers, sometimes perfect strangers, and always in the presence of those who tend us because they know us better than all others.

And so today, on this day, whatever day of the week it might be, as we celebrate the power and promise of God and catch just a glimpse of the glory of God as Jesus is carried into heaven – I will share this blessing with you – a blessing of good news. If you cannot remember what day it is – if you are overwhelmed with life – if you are tired of home schooling, working from home, and even home cooking – than on this day – hear these words for this life you live...the words of author Jan Richardson from *The Cure for Sorrow: A Book of Blessings for Times of Grief*.

“I know how your mind rushes ahead, trying to fathom what could follow this. What will you do, where will you go, how will you live? You will want to outrun the grief. You will want to keep turning toward the horizon, watching for what was lost to come back, to return to you and never leave again. For now, hear me when I say all you need to do is to still yourself, is to turn toward one another, is to stay. Wait and see what comes to fill the gaping hole in your chest. Wait with your hands open to receive what could never come except to what is empty and hollow. You cannot know it now, cannot even imagine what lies ahead, but I tell you the day is coming when breath will fill your lungs as it never has before, and with your own ears you will hear words coming to you new and startling. You will dream dreams and you will see the world ablaze with blessing. Wait for it. Still yourself. Stay.”

“Stay until you have been clothed with power from on high,” Jesus tells the disciples. Dear friends, by the grace of God and in the waters of baptism, you have already been dressed in the light of Christ. Maybe today is the day you let a little more of that light shine. Look for the helpers – of course. But maybe keep one eye open for the beautiful feet of those who bring you good news and keep the other eye open for those who need you to move your feet towards them and bring them the good news of God’s love and life and light until we see the world ablaze with blessing. Peace be with you. Amen.