

“You Will Be My Witnesses”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
June 1, 2014 – Ascension Day
Capital Campaign Kick-Off

Acts 1: 6-14

When do you get anxious or nervous? Is it preparing for a big project or final exam at school, and you’re worried about how you will ultimately do? Is it going to the doctor’s office, to receive news regarding a series medical tests, and how that will impact what comes next in your life? Is it preparing for a review at work, and wondering how your superiors will rate or judge your job performance over the past year? Is it seeking to hear from a family member who has disengaged from you for whatever reason, and you are concerned about his or her emotional and physical well-being?

I don’t think I’ve shared this before, but other than the Sunday when I came to “candidate” here in February 2003, the most nervous I have been coming to work was August 4, 2013. That was my first Sunday back after the four-month renewal you and I shared last year. Why was I so nervous? It was probably because I had been apart from all of you for a significant period of time. I had not been present for significant events in your life – deaths, transitions, celebrations – and you had not been present for special events I had experienced. I worried about how each of us had changed. I worried about how those initial days and weeks back together would go for all of us. I wondered if would you even want me back after being away for four months.

It’s amazing how anxiety and worry can hijack our perception of reality. On that day in August, I had allowed my worries to mask my ability to see in faith how God was holding all of us together in this transition time. As we walked the weeks and months that followed that time of renewal, I slowly let go of the anxiety and began to trust even deeper in God’s abiding presence. Sometimes, it first takes acknowledging our anxiety and worry before we are then able to open ourselves to trust, to hope, to faith.

Two weeks ago, Lisa spoke eloquently about saying goodbye, and how saying goodbye is a constant in our lives of faith. Moving, death, graduations, retirements, trips – there are many, many different ways we experience separation and change. In the passage from John that Lisa preached on, Jesus was saying a long goodbye to his disciples – preparing them for the time when he would no longer physically be with them. And yet, they just didn’t get what he was trying to say to them, and over the course of events which follow, the disciples grew in their anxiety and worry and uncertainty about who they were and what they would do if and when Jesus left them.

Which brings us to today – Ascension Day – when we celebrate Jesus’ ascension from earth to heaven. It’s no longer a theoretical exercise for the disciples, when Jesus was trying to prepare them for his departure in the

Gospel of John. Today, the plane is leaving the gate; the car is driving out of the driveway; the door is closing for the last time. How will the disciples respond in the face of uncertainty and worry? What direction will Jesus give to them, so that they look forward and not backward amid his departure? How do we respond in times of uncertainty and anxiety, when it feels like our Lord is leaving us, even though he has given us all that we need to live faithful and devoted lives of discipleship?

As our passage begins, we find Jesus preparing to part ways with his disciples after the resurrection. Once they were all gathered together, the disciples asked Jesus if this was now when he would “restore the kingdom to Israel?” (1:6). Jesus says no, that is not for us humans to know. But what was important was for them to know that someone was coming to help them during their time apart: “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” (1:8). Because they believed in him as their Lord, before he was crucified, they would receive God’s Spirit to minister in Christ’s name now that they would be apart.

And then, something kind of comical happens. We read that after Jesus had said these things, he was lifted up and taken into heaven by a cloud. “While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, ‘Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?’” (1:11). It reminds me of when you watch something happen in the sky – a plane or hot air balloon flying overhead – and you continue to seek the object long after it has departed from your sight.

“Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” It sounds similar to what we heard the angels say at the empty tomb on Easter Sunday. “He is not here; for he has been raised, and he is going ahead of you” (Matthew 28:6-7). Jesus’ earthly life has come to an end. But that does not mean it is an end to the earthly story of God’s love. The ascension of Jesus is not just a time to celebrate his earthly rule. It also is a moment to consider the church’s role of serving in his name. Even though this is the end of his earthly life, it is the preface to the story of his body – the Church – continuing God’s work in the world.

One preacher says: *In some ways, Ascension Day is the first day of Ordinary Time, the time in-between, the time between resurrection and the end of history itself. We confess that Jesus has ascended to the right hand of God. He has gone into the future, where he bends our days toward justice and peace; he goes ahead of us into eternity, where all will one day be gathered. Yet Ascension Day feels like the day after the party, the day after visiting family has packed up and driven away. It’s the day to wash the sheets and put away the special dishes. It’s the day for the walk back to Jerusalem.*

Maybe the ascension teaches us to trust these moments of absence. There are times when Christ has to leave us so that we figure out how to carry light ourselves. We need his absence to discover the power of Easter life within us. There is both loss and power, death and resurrection, in this

mysterious realization that incarnation includes us (Bradley Schmeling, *Christian Century*, May 28, 2014: 20).

In the times of grief and doubt, of anxiety and worry, of loss and struggle, of absence – in all those times, we are never truly alone. Jesus reassures his disciples in this final moment of saying goodbye, that even amid their worry, “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” (1:8). God has empowered the disciples to carry on Jesus’ earthly ministry as the church, and instead of looking up into the sky for him, they are encouraged to “return to Jerusalem,” where they devoted themselves to prayer and study, as they awaited God’s discerning call.

In times of anxiety and worry, we are never truly alone. Jesus has reassured us that even after his ascension, his work and ministry must go on. “You will be my witnesses – in your neighborhoods, in your schools, in your workplaces, in your families, in your city, in your state, in your world. You will be my witnesses at 3000 North High School Road.” For we have received power from the Holy Spirit to witness to others what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

Five years ago, this congregation made an intentional choice to be witnesses of Jesus Christ in this particular community for the long-term. We decided then that God was calling us to gather together in a new worship space, as our old sanctuary was in significant disrepair. We chose not to abandon this community, but to remain here, to serve here, to care for others here, to be a beacon of hope here, knowing it would mean a long-term financial commitment on all of our parts.

Today we not only look back on how God has blessed us as a congregation with this beautiful space, but also how God is calling us to stop staring up at the sky, and continue to look forward to where Jesus next wants us to be his witnesses. We recommit ourselves today to this financial commitment of paying on the loan for this new space. We remind ourselves today that this is not just a building of bricks and mortar and carpet and paint and furnishings. It is a space that allows us to be Christ’s witnesses both within these walls and outside these walls. It is a safe space for children to learn, for adults to seek recovery, for seniors to study God’s Word, for all to worship and grow and serve. It is from the interactions and spiritual nurture that take place in this space that we are Christ’s witnesses in our world: helping a neighbor in need; serving with Habitat for Humanity or Hearts and Hands in our city; visiting a homebound friend; offering a ride to a doctor’s appointment; sending a card to someone at just the right moment. We gather in this space as the Body of Christ, so that we might serve as the Body of Christ outside this space.

And yet, we are facing a major obstacle when it comes to this space at 30th and High School Road. As you will hear more about during the program after lunch today, the roof which covers everything but the sanctuary, fellowship hall, and office suite is in need of replacement. If you have been in

the kitchen anytime recently, you are keenly aware of this problem. Decisions about this roof in the past were made to try and save money. Those decisions have led to a poorly-designed and badly-installed roof, which instead of lasting twenty years as promised has only lasted thirteen. It will be costly, and we will have to use monies from this campaign to replace it – less monies which cannot go to paying down the principal on our debt.

What's different about this "crisis" than previous ones? The leadership of this congregation recognizes that this space is not just a building for us now, but a space which must be usable and viable for future generations. We also recognize how our decisions now will have a lasting impact on our long-term commitment to this community in Christ's name. That is why a design consultant will come and evaluate the roof, as well as the proposed bids, giving us objective, reliable information that will inform our decision. That is why we will be transparent and keep you fully informed as to the final cost, design, and reasons for that decision. That is why we will not base our decision on what saves us the most money now, but what is best for the long-term maintenance, cost, and lifespan of the building. We will not make those past mistakes again – I promise you that.

But honestly, what has changed most for this congregation, is that we trust God now more than ever before. And we have responded, again and again and again, to Jesus' call that we will be his witnesses to our community and our world. That is why, in six years, we have given over \$1.2 million to these capital campaigns, and in each of the two previous campaigns, we have exceeded our goals by a total of \$80,000. That is why we do not first say, "What's in it for me?" but instead say, "What's best for the whole?" That is why our presbytery, partner churches like Second Presbyterian Church in Indianapolis, and many other individuals, have invested with Presbyterian Investment and Loan Program on our behalf, so that we are receiving .75% of a rebate annually on our loan. We will face this challenge as we have faced other past challenges: by being faithful witnesses of the one who calls us to be his light to a world in such desperate need.

When anxiety starts to form, don't be afraid. When worry starts to creep in, don't be overwhelmed. When it feels like you are alone, don't forget who is walking alongside you. Jesus may have ascended into heaven, but he has promised the Advocate, God's Holy Spirit, to empower us to be his heart, his hands, his feet as his Body, the church. It is our responsibility to witness, to move out of our comfort zones, and to tell others that God's light of love is here, and it will never be extinguished.

"You will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth." Thanks be to God. Amen.