

June 5, 2011
Acts 1:1-11

Ascension A
Good-byes and Waitings

Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Not many people I know like good-byes. It's always a sad time, even if it is only for a few hours or days. I can tell you there are times I get all weepy when I have to say good bye. Take for instance, my four summers working on a camp staff. We would grow so very close, even closer than some families are, and then come August when we are ripped apart every time one member of the staff would leave, it would turn into a cry fest. My last weekend at my vicarage congregation was one of those experiences too, after having been with them for 12 months and serving alongside of them and then taking me away is a hard thing to do. Think back to one of your sad good-byes...maybe it was moving away from home, a graduation, sending off a loved one to the military or even you yourself. Good byes in my mind are never fun.

Jesus has walked and talked with his disciples for three years. They watched him perform many miracles. They learned a lot. I would love to sit at the feet of Jesus (the person) and learn from him as they did. They witnessed his death; they have now been with him for another 40 days after he rose from the dead. Now Jesus is amongst his disciples here in Acts 1 for the last time physically here on earth. His goodbye wasn't anything like ours...at least the words...he didn't say, "See ya next year" or "I'll call ya next week." He said, *"It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*

Something else happens when people say good-byes, and I notice it more amongst Lutherans and even myself. It takes me a long time to say good bye. I even recall some of the memories that we've shared. Jesus takes what 40 days to recall many of his teachings and miracles with his disciples. As Jesus brought his disciples back to the Mount of Olives, he knew that his work was finished here on earth. Christ's ascension meant it was time for someone else to grab hold. He gave gifts of ministry to his disciples, to the apostles and he sent them out, but yet told them to wait till they received the Holy Spirit.

You know when we make our goodbyes, they sometimes comes with promises – "I'll call you later." Or even, "I'll do my part in keeping in touch." We've all made those promises and you know what...those people at camp that I worked with, maybe I talk to a few of them each year, once or twice. Jesus though he didn't break his good-bye promises he sent the Holy Spirit to the disciples. He even promises that he would be with us forever...and he keeps that promise as well.

Let me take you now to the time in the text when the disciples are watching Jesus ascend into heaven, with what I imagine are tears flowing down their faces. Then they just stood there looking up and then the angel appeared saying, *"Men of Galilee, why do*

you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

It was 5:30 AM, I had just pulled off of the causeway, I stopped the car, stepped out and looked back over the causeway to the island...gazing at what I just had said good-bye to. It was my last summer as a staff person at camp. I was recalling everything that had happened and I was waiting for it to start all over again. I was waiting for that time of fun, fellowship, worship, laughter, and so on start up again. I was waiting to be rewound three months...and you know what it didn't happen. Or perhaps, it's the picture of the little boy with his face plastered to the glass window in the airport as daddy has just boarded a plane for the military and he doesn't know when or if he is coming home.

We all tend to wait after the good bye. We all tend to wait for things to happen on their own. There is an ancient apocryphal story about Jesus' arrival at the Pearly Gates following his ascension. The angel host was gathered to welcome God's Son and celebrate his return home after his incredible sojourn on earth. Everyone had questions and wanted to hear his story – born of a virgin, raised in humble circumstances, years teaching, preaching, healing. Eventually, there was that gruesome torture and murder, but finally the conquest of humanity's most feared enemies: sin, death, and the devil. All to share the good news of a loving God who wants nothing but the best for creation. Now the Christ is home, and everyone is exultant You know his work was done there.

One of the angels ask, "Lord, now that you are no longer physically on earth, who will continue to share the good news?" Christ responds, "There are 11 men who were especially close to me, and I have given them the responsibility of getting the word out." "O Lord, these 11 men must be incredible – the best and the brightest that creation has to offer!"

"Well, actually no," the Lord responds. "These are average folks with ordinary abilities. Not the "best and the brightest" by any means." "But Lord, if these are only average people with ordinary ability, how can you be sure they will get the job done?" Well, to be honest," Jesus answers, "I can't be sure." "You cannot be sure, Lord? Well, what if they fail to do the job? What is your backup plan?" Christ quietly answers, "I have no backup plan."

Take it this story is a little cliché, we know Jesus was sure in what he was going, he was sending the Holy Spirit. The men weren't going at this alone without help, but this story makes a point, these men were ordinary average joes. These men were fishermen by trade. (most of them at least) These men were like you and me. Average.

These disciples were given the direction to wait at their Passover meal. Wait to receive the power from the Holy Spirit. They like the rest of his did not like to wait. Waiting in lines, waiting in traffic, waiting for the results from the lab work, waiting for the doctor, waiting for the last few days of school to be over, waiting for summer vacation to be here, waiting to hear on your job application. We wait all the time.

But that was then. Before Pentecost...before what we celebrate next Sunday. We are post-Pentecost Christians. We aren't given the command of wait around till the Holy Spirit comes...we are given a different command. "GO". "Go into all the world making disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." He tells YOU to go.

Jesus Christ came...he did his work. He said goodbye because his physical work on earth was done and provided men and women to be his hands and his feet to carry out the mission of the Church. He provided these people with the Holy Spirit.

Think about the book of Acts with me for a while! We've been reading portions of it every Sunday since Easter. You've met people like Stephen, Peter, and to some extent Paul. You've seen what they have done. The story of Acts fulfills Acts 1:8. This next quote is not mine, it's a from a friend of mine in his sermon to his people today and I liked it so much that I asked him if I could take it: "If 12 men could spread the faith to millions of people, imagine what the 100 we have in worship this morning could do." Imagine if Jesus was physically present today and he came to you before he ascended and he said, "You will be my witnesses in Necedah (New Miner), Juneau County, Wisconsin and to the ends of the earth." How would you respond? In essence he is saying that to you today. He is telling you to go out and share the message, both verbally but also by how you carry yourselves day in and day out. Your actions and what you stand for is how people see your faith.

You are able to do that because Jesus Christ has given each of you a gift. He's given each of you different gifts to use for his Church, the Kingdom of God. He's also given each of you the same gift, the gift that he told the disciples to wait for...the Holy Spirit. He's given you so many gifts. He's given you everything that you have. He's actually entrusted it into your care including your faith. He's also sent us all into the world to be his disciples. He sends you even today to go into the world to do as he sees fit.

You see when Jesus says his good byes and the disciples are standing there waiting for him to come back, in essence he's like "keep in touch, I'll keep my end of the bargain." He has and continues to do so. He left you his Word. He left you the ability to go to him in prayer. He left you with everything you need. And you know what...we do wait...we don't wait for the Holy Spirit because we have him. We wait for Jesus to come back and to take us home as we heard in the gospel lesson a few weeks back...he's preparing a place for each of us and then he's going to come back and take us body and soul into his new creation. Until that day comes, a promise that he will keep, we continue to do what God has sent us to do...and that is be witnesses of Him to all nations. For us it is not a matter of good bye or even waiting...it's a matter of doing. For the Apostles didn't sit back and wait for someone else to do it...they actually did it. For this whole life of Christianity is a matter of action and doing and reaching out, serving the needs of God's people. So I pray that you join with me in reaching out to our community and their needs. I can't do it alone. I need you. In Jesus Name. Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding, guard your hearts and your minds and keep them focused in Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior. Amen.