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Acts 1:1 – 11

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Wake From Resurrection to Pentecost

For 40 days they had experienced the risen savior. It had been a time full of doubts, surprises, rubbing of eyes to make sure they were seeing what they thought they were seeing, miracles, excitement, amazement, and on and on. But each time they saw the resurrected savior they must have become more and more certain that what was happening was not a dream, not something conjured up out of their grief. Jesus, who had been dead, was alive again.

And now, as the days passed, they had to be increasingly wondering about the question that they had asked Jesus, in various and sundry ways, before he had been crucified. “When will you restore the Kingdom of God to Israel?” In other words, “When will we finally take over from the Romans?! When will we be in charge?!” And as you hear the question, one can only imagine that this is what they’ve been wanting to ask for many of these 40 days. Kind of like when someone surprisingly invites you out and you know there’s something they’re going to tell you, but you keep engaging in mindless chatter, all the while you’re doing everything you can to not burst out with the question until finally you can’t take it any more and so blurt out, “What is it, what news do you have to share?!”

So you get this feeling that when Jesus is telling them about how they are supposed to stay in Jerusalem and wait there for the gift that God is going to give them, they’re probably smiling and nodding but all the while in their thought bubble they’re thinking about what it will be like when they’re in charge, when they are finally in control. Yes, yes, John and water and baptism and the Holy Spirit, sure Jesus, whatever you say. Until finally one day, as they are, not surprisingly, eating, they blurt it out, “When will you restore the Kingdom of Israel?!”

To which Jesus, as he has done time and again before, tells them that it’s not for them to know the date. But this time he moves into something a bit different, something that may have gotten their minds off of just thinking about how great it will be when Jesus takes over Jerusalem and begins ruling beside them. Because Jesus begins to reframe the conversation, if you will. For instead of talking about his kingdom Jesus begins to look at them, and my guess is to look at them intently.

“But *you* will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on *you*; and *you* will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria.” And can’t you just imagine their looks at this point? Here they are wondering, hoping, probably believing that this is the time when they will pony up behind Jesus and take over and all of a sudden he is talking about them, not him, being the ones who are declaring the Kingdom of God has come. I just imagine them looking at Jesus and thinking, “Me, are you kidding me.” And then looking to their left and right and thinking, “Him and him?” Are you serious?! And then as

they look back at Jesus with looks of surprise, awe, terror and confusion, Jesus begins to rise up, “before their very eyes” as Luke says, until the clouds hid him from their sight.

Surely they’re thinking, “Is this a joke?” “Is this a test?” I get the feeling that they kept looking up, not just because they were hoping that Jesus would come back down, but because they knew that as soon as they stopped looking up and started looking around them, that the reality of the predicament they were in would become all too concrete. If they kept their eyes on the clouds, their heads in the clouds, then they didn’t have to look at the incredibly human disciples who surrounded them and to whom Jesus said would be responsible for being witnesses of him and for him. So intently, in fact, were they looking up at the clouds, that the two men were probably standing next to them without them even realizing it. “Men of Galilee,” they said, perhaps looking up with them into the sky, “why do you stand here looking into the sky?” Perhaps the disciples just kept looking up, again not wanting to take their eyes off of Jesus just in case, like a balloon losing its’ helium, he might slowly be coming back down. When no response comes the two men say, “This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you’ve seen him go into heaven.” And at last, they look down and, as verse 12 tells us and we’ll see next week, the disciples headed back to Jerusalem.

This is a rather fascinating text and yet nearly as fascinating as this text is the fact that this event, “The Ascension” as the church has historically referred to it, is something that we don’t really talk about or celebrate a whole lot. Something I read this week talked about how one could go to a Hallmark store and look long and hard to find a “Happy Ascension Day” card and never find one. In fact, if I were to ask you when “Ascension Day” is this year, I wonder how many of you could tell me? Well, if you’re curious, it is coming up this next Thursday, on the 29th of May.

There are several reasons why we should not so quickly overlook the Ascension. But what stood out to me this week about this scene and these days between the Ascension and Pentecost is how well they illustrate for us the tension that we are often in, whether we give voice to it or not. It is the tension we see in these disciples between witnessing, on the one hand, and waiting, on the other. Witnessing and waiting.

Let’s think about what Jesus said about witnessing. As I’ve already said, I can’t imagine that the disciples weren’t gobsmacked when they fully grasped that Jesus had gone up into the heavens and that *they* were called to be witnesses. Why? Because the reality is they knew themselves quite well and could come up with lots of reasons why they shouldn’t be the ones who are trying to bring about God’s kingdom in this world. My guess is their excuses might sound quite similar to ours: we’ve done things in our past we shouldn’t have or struggle with doubt or don’t have a lot of courage or easily give up or have fallen short so many times and on and on the list could go. The reality is that when it comes to fulfilling the mission of God we often would prefer someone from the outside to come in and do it for us, someone who is an “all-star” so to speak. Again, we know better than anyone else our own inadequacies and weaknesses.

Now the good news is that at least the disciples were hoping that Jesus would come down and lead them to the promised land. Today, well, there are many churches who would be happy with anyone coming in and bringing them to the promised land, even if it isn't Jesus! When I worked with Presbyterian Global Fellowship I had a great opportunity to work with churches of various sizes, some who were doing well, but many who were struggling. And one of the things I couldn't help but notice is that they were continually hoping that someone or something would come in and rescue them, would come in and help them be better witnesses. Maybe it was a program that another church had been using that they could just apply to their own church and voila, everything would turn around and they could instantly see God's kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. Or maybe it was a worship service that they could start that all of a sudden would make their church once again the beacon that would see God's kingdom come through the young people that would come flooding back into their churches. But most often, and my guess is this is no surprise, the thing that they kept staring off in the clouds and hoping would bring them God's kingdom and help their church be the witness it should be was, of course, a superstar pastor. A pastor who could come in and preach in such a way and dream in such a way and lead in such a way that the kingdom of God couldn't help but all of a sudden be born in their midst.

Now, there's nothing wrong with good programs or good worship services or good pastors, but the danger comes, it seems to me, when we begin focusing on those things (and that happens remarkably easily) and start conveniently forgetting that Jesus said, "You," and that means all of you, "are to be his witnesses." That the only way for a church to really be fulfilling the mission that God has given it is when all of us, all of us, realize that we are witnesses to the love and grace of God. Whether that's by welcoming people when they come in here or teaching a class or serving with integrity at your workplace or treating people like Jesus would treat them, whatever it is, there are none of us who are off the hook. All of us are called to be Jesus' witnesses.

It was in thinking about this that we had a great discussion at our staff retreat this week. One of the things I asked them was how can we make sure that ZPC is not a pastor-centric church. And the staff was more than happy to chime in with ways to make sure this church is not about me! And those ways included making sure that you all had opportunities to be up front, including ways to give testimonies (something that vision 2020 talked about and that we'll be doing a bit of when we start our series on the Psalms this summer). And it was interesting that as we had this conversation what we really keyed in on was making sure that you all kept being the witnesses that you are now and that we keep encouraging that and being intentional about it. And what's interesting is that being a non-pastor centric church is not about making sure the pastor never does anything, but is about ensuring that everyone is doing something. That everyone, which includes the session, the deacons, the staff, our new 6th grade members, our 3rd graders who just got their Bibles and everyone in between understand that they have been called to be witnesses, to be participants in the Kingdom of God. And so I want you to look to the person next to you and say to them, "You are Jesus' witness."

But then, as I said earlier, we get the other side of the tension of the Ascension. Which is that we not forget that while we are each Christ's witness, we cannot do that without the power of the Holy Spirit. Which is why it is that the disciples were told, commanded really, to stay in Jerusalem, to wait for God. If you think about it, it's a bit strange that there is this gap of time between when Jesus leaves and when the Holy Spirit arrives. I mean, if God had wanted it he could have been much more efficient and simply had the Holy Spirit hit the down button when Jesus hit the up button. But he didn't. He told them to wait. It's strange, isn't it?

As I was thinking about this notion of waiting I was reminded of the famous text in Isaiah 40 which, my guess is, most of us are familiar with. It says, "Those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint." Many scholars believe these words were spoken when the Jewish people were in exile in Babylon, spiritually isolated and afraid, certain that God had forgotten them. And one of the things this passage is speaking to is that even when it seems that everything has gone awry, when hope seems lost and the future appears bleak, that they need to wait upon God, because God is still in control. That though they may not be able to see a way out, God can always make a way. In other words, this waiting is a way of speaking to the fact that we are not in control, God is.

And I can't help but think that in some sense that is what is going on here in this Ascension scene. That the disciples were given this daunting task to be witnesses to all the world and at the same time they have watched their risen savior, Jesus, leave them, but even in the midst of all of that God is still in control. That this waiting period between when Jesus has left and when the Spirit will come, is there quite deliberately as a time for them to grow in their belief that even though they will be doing the witnessing, that God is the one who is giving them the strength to do so. That even though there may be periods when things are not going well and they are struggling, that God is right there with them, despite how it might appear. My guess is that all of us have had times in our lives when we feel like we haven't seen or heard from God, when things are against us, when try as we might we can't seem to get things to go our way and in those "waiting moments" we must decide whether we will simply give up or whether we will allow them to remind us and teach us that God is in control.

You see, one of the most important reasons why we cannot ignore the Ascension is because it paints for us this vivid picture of the fact that if we as a church, if you as a Christ-follower, are going to fulfill the mission of God that we have been given, then we have to remain in the tension of witnessing and waiting. If we focus only on the waiting, on thinking, well, God's in control so I needn't do anything, then we become complacent and easily fall into the trap of thinking, "Well, that person over there is gifted, let her do it," or "I'm not the pastor, let him do it." And if we focus only on the witness, then we may end up accomplishing some things, but we end up doing only what we as finite humans can do, missing out on the bold, God-sized plans that Christ has for us a people and as a community. But if we can hold these two things in tension then, witnessing and waiting, then we open ourselves up to experiencing the Spirit of God work in remarkable ways, just as the disciples will soon experience on the day of Pentecost.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, I know that today is a big day because of the Indy 500 and I know that tomorrow is a wonderful holiday, but I hope and pray that as Ascension Day is upon us this Thursday that we will take the time to ask whether or not we genuinely believe that each of us have been called as witnesses as well as whether we live in such a way that it's clear that we understand God, not us, is in control. May we be challenged this Thursday, and every day, to live in this Ascension tension so that God might continue to work in us and through us, as the Kingdom of God comes on earth as it is in heaven. May it be so. Amen.