**The Ascension of the Lord**

**Sunday May 24, 2020**

**“The Challenge of Waiting” (Luke 24:44-53)**

As we’ve been walking through the various Gospel lessons of the season of Easter, an interesting pattern has emerged. In all these Gospel readings, Jesus offers reassuring and comforting words to his frightened, troubled, and confused disciples. Prior to Good Friday, he warned his disciples about the impending chain of events that would befall him. Amidst these dire warnings, he calmed their troubled hearts by assuring them of God’s enduring presence. He gave them some of his most memorable and encouraging words: “*I am the Good Shepherd*” (John 10:11), “*I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life*,” (John 14:6), “*I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you*” (John 14:18), and “*I will ask the Father and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever”* (John 14:16). These words are for us too as we navigate the uncertain path ahead of us. Whatever happens to us, we can have the confidence that God is with us. The Good Shepherd guides and protects us. Through Jesus we are walking on the Way to God. We are never alone because the Paraclete-Spirit abides within us. We are not abandoned as orphans, but are embraced within God’s family.

In Jesus’ resurrection appearances a similar scenario was being played out. His disciples were sorrowful, fearful, and confused but he came to them and offered them his encouragement. “*Peace be with you*,” he said to them (Luke 24:36; John 20:19, 21, 26) and he showed them his wounds, verifying his identity as the risen Lord (Luke 24:39-40; John 20:20, 27). Amidst their distress and confusion, he pointed to the Scriptures and opened up their minds to understand that the events of Good Friday and Easter Sunday were in God’s plan all along. In the same way, the risen Christ stands among us, offering us his peace and presence during these difficult times.

But another lesson can be found in these Gospel passages. Along with comfort, Jesus brings *challenge*. His resurrection marked a dramatic change in the world and like a stone creating ripples in a pond, he sends us out to be his resurrection people in the world. To the frightened disciples hiding behind closed doors, he declared, “Peace be with you. *As the Father has sent me, so I send you*” (John 20:21). In this morning’s lesson from Luke’s Gospel, Jesus announces that, “*repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem*” (Luke 24:47). He adds that his disciples would be the bearers of this message as *witnesses of all these things* (Luke 24:48). But soon Jesus would ascend from the earth and I wonder if the prospect of conducting this mission without the physical presence of Jesus filled the disciples’ hearts with fear. Did they wonder how they were going to continue without him? After Jesus departed and they were on their own, did they look at each other and ask, “What now?” In a similar manner, we might feel overwhelmed by the multifaceted mission that God has called us to. We might feel that there’s not much we really can do as a small church. We might think that we don’t have the people, the gifts, or the resources to minister effectively in our neighbourhoods. But when we start to feel this way, we need to remind ourselves that the first group of Christians that gathered together in those days and weeks after Easter was not large or noteworthy and they faced considerable challenges. Where would we be if they had given up? What would have happened if they had decided to stay behind closed doors in fear of the world?

We know, of course, that things didn’t turn out that way. That small group of Christians increased in number and reached beyond Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. The spark that lit the flame of the early church was God’s provision of his Spirit. In John’s account of Easter Sunday, Jesus appeared to his disciples, declared that he was sending them out, breathed upon them and said, “*Receive the Holy Spirit*” (John 20:21-22). The sending out in mission and the gift of the Spirit go together. The indispensible resource that the church requires for mission is the Spirit of God. Luke, the writer of the third Gospel and the book of Acts, stresses this throughout his writings. He makes it very clear that the presence and power of the Holy Spirit was central to the life and mission of Jesus and of the early church.

We can be encouraged, then, that as God sends us out in mission, he also generously provides us with all the resources we need for his kingdom work. When Jesus called his disciples to proclaim the message, he also promised to send the Spirit to empower them for this task (Luke 24:47-49). The Spirit, then, has a vocational role in equipping God’s people for mission in the world. But here in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus instructs his disciples to *wait* in Jerusalem for the coming of the promised Holy Spirit before they launch out in mission. Jesus’ invitation to wait is timely for the church amidst this pandemic, but the challenge of waiting for something is applicable for Christians at all times. In a world that promises instant gratification, quick delivery, high efficiency, and fast Internet, we have become accustomed to getting what we want when we want it. As a result, the art of waiting has been lost.

Today is Ascension Sunday, the day that we mark the physical departure of Jesus from earth and his return to the Father to reign with him. Next Sunday is Pentecost, the day that we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit to empower the church for mission. This morning’s Gospel lesson teaches us a much-needed lesson in the value of waiting. In the time in between Ascension and Pentecost those first Christians heeded the Lord’s words and waited patiently in Jerusalem for the promised Holy Spirit. Our lives are filled with similar *in between* times that require us to wait patiently. Between planting a garden and enjoying its fruits. Between starting a home renovation project and seeing its completion. Between getting a diagnosis and receiving treatment. Between starting a church ministry and experiencing its impact. Between saying a prayer and receiving an answer. Between practicing physical distancing and re-gathering for worship and fellowship. So much of life is lived in-between and this is why we need to learn how to live faithfully in the in-between times.

Easter Sunday has come and gone. Christ is risen and a brand new world with Jesus as Lord is here. God’s kingdom is here, yet we eagerly await its final consummation on that great and glorious day. Christ is risen, yet we wait for the fullness of his resurrection power to be manifest in our midst. Ready and willing to be part of God’s mission, we wait for the promised Holy Spirit to come and make a difference. Sometimes we’re able to wait patiently when we trust God and realize that he’s in control. At other times, we feel lost, betrayed, let down, and frustrated during these in-between times. We may even wrongly assume that these long pauses indicate that God doesn’t love us. Scripture reminds us that God’s people had been waiting a long time for the Messiah to come. Jesus’ words in Luke 24:44 teach us that centuries of hopeful waiting had finally come to a grand conclusion as the words of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms were fulfilled in Jesus.

Those first Christians had more waiting to do. Jesus commanded them to “*stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high*” (Luke 24:49). With these words, Jesus led his disciples out to Bethany for a final farewell. There, he blessed his friends, departed from them and placed them into an in-between time. The Gospel’s ending is almost like a movie that deserves a thrilling conclusion and we’re left with an anticlimax. But this lack of closure didn’t discourage the disciples. They received Jesus’ blessing, worshipped God, and lived with great joy (Luke 24:51-53). They didn’t have all the answers, but they had the important things: a sense of purpose from God, the blessing of Jesus, the fellowship of others, and great joy. We can learn a great deal from these first believers as they lived faithfully and joyfully in-between the Ascension and Pentecost.

How are you living in the in-between times in your life? Instead of getting frustrated, let’s embrace these in-between times as opportunities for God to teach, change, and prepare us. In-between times help us to appreciate and see God in all the moments in our lives, not just the momentous ones. In-between times can forge in us a skill that Christians in every age have had to learn: the art of waiting. We will experience new beginnings and moments of closure in our lives, but for the most part, we live in the in-between. The good news is that God is in the in-between time with us. He teaches us, renews us, and helps us be joyful with the knowledge that we are neither stagnant nor completed.

May God grant each one of us the grace to wait patiently and live faithfully in the in-between times of our lives.