

Christ is with Us
Luke 24:44-53
June 2, 2019 – Seventh Sunday of Easter

So, forty days after Easter, forty days after the resurrection, we celebrate the ascension of our Lord – the day Jesus ascended to heaven to “sit at the right hand of God, the Father.” Well, I’m here on this first Sunday after the ascension to tell you that Christ is still with us; Christ is always with us. But, before getting into those details, let me re-echo what I said a few weeks ago.

You may remember that earlier in this chapter, when Jesus was walking the road to Emmaus with two of the disciples, we heard how he opened the scripture to them – explaining what was written by Moses and the prophets. And here again, just a few verses later we read that Jesus opened the minds of the disciples to understand the scriptures.

In four short weeks, I will preach my last sermon from this pulpit, at least my last sermon as you pastor. (I will not rule out the possibility of coming back at some point in the future as a guest or a fill-in preacher.) But I wonder how many of you remember the first sermon I preached here, now almost eight years ago. I’ll say more about that sermon in a few weeks; but today let me simply say that the overall theme of the sermon was what I’ll call the macro-story, the over-arching story of the entire Bible; and that macro-story is the story of God’s love.

I have been extremely disheartened in recent months by the events taking place in the United Methodist Church; and I have been extremely frustrated when people have justified those events by quoting snippets of scripture, lifting them out of context, and using them contrary to the over-arching story of the Bible.

I’ve quoted before the words of the great German theologian, Karl Barth. One day a member of Barth’s audience asked: “Herr Barth, you have written so many wonderful books, you have said so much about Christian theology; but could you please simplify it for me? Could you just give it to me in a nutshell?” Barth responded: “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” Friends, Jesus loves each and every person on this planet, and I fully believe that we, as Christians, are called to do likewise. Yes, we are called to love and accept all people and all means all. We are called to accept all people for the people that God created them to be; because, as the saying goes, “God doesn’t make junk.”

But as strongly as I believe that, today’s sermon is not so much about the other folks. Today’s sermon is about you and about me. Today’s sermon is about the reassurance of scripture that God loves you and God loves me; and that love will never end.

So, Jesus ascended. . . but there’s this “thing” that happened. . . This promise. . . This event. . . Jesus said, I’m going to leave you now, but I’m sending you what my Father promised. Stay here in the city until you have been furnished with the power from on high.” What’s the power from on high? You know it. I know it. It’s the Holy Spirit. It’s coming next week, as we celebrate Pentecost.

And I'm here to tell you today, that Holy Spirit is also the Spirit of the Risen Christ.

The doctrine of the Holy Trinity is probably the most complicated, I might even say convoluted, doctrine of our faith. We say: I believe in one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Through the ages, theologians have sought to explain this. They speak of three persons of one essence or one substance. They speak of one God fulfilling three roles. (I find that one a bit more helpful.) Throughout history theologians have varied when speaking of the "three in one" as to whether they have emphasized the three or the one; and I personally have stated that I tend to emphasize the "one." I tend to be fairly Unitarian in my Trinitarian views. The theologian Ralph Sockman, used to speak of being triunitarian, and I like that. I try not to separate "The Holy" into three boxes. God is just too big for that. And so, when I think of the Holy Spirit, I cannot separate it from the Spirit of Christ, ever present with me.

Forty days after Easter, Christ left the disciples, left in bodily form. He was taken up to heaven. I'm not real sure what that looked like. If we take the Gospel very literally, we believe in some kind of a "beam me up, Scottie" situation. I'm not sure that's true. I'm not sure I can accept that. I do know that Christ left, never to be seen again in physical form. Never again would someone probe his wounds or watch as he ate some fish; but I tell you Christ is with us.

The triunitarian in me says Christ is the power from on high. The triunitarian in me says we can't tear the risen Christ and the Holy Spirit apart. (I'm getting a little heretical here. Bear with me. I'm retiring in a month, so I don't think I can get in too much trouble for this.)

You see, Jesus has ascended. No, we can no longer touch the body. But Jesus promised to be with us always, and that's the Spirit, that's the Spirit of the risen Christ, that's the Holy Spirit. That's the power from on high; and, friends, there is no greater power and there is no greater joy.

Jesus lifted his hand, and he blessed them; and, as I have said repeatedly over the last few weeks, I also believe the "them" includes each of us. Jesus has blessed us. And as he blessed them, he withdrew from them and was carried up to heaven. And his followers worshiped him; and returned to the city with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God. Do you hear the joy? Do you sense the joy? Do you feel the joy?

It's noteworthy. . . The disciples were not sad because Jesus had left. No, the disciples were joyful because they had the promise of Christ. The disciples were joyful because they sensed the power of the risen Christ. The disciples were joyful because they knew that the spirit of the Risen Christ would truly be with them always, even to the end of the age.

Praise be to God for the promise of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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