

Ascension Sunday Sermon
Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington
Rev. Reebee Kavich Girash
May 16, 2021

Text:

Luke 24:44-53

24:44 Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you--that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled."

24:45 Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures,

24:46 and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day,

24:47 and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

24:48 You are witnesses of these things.

24:49 And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

24:50 Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them.

24:51 While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.

24:52 And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy;

24:53 and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Prayer

Sermon

“...Repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.”

Beginning from Jerusalem, they made a difference in the world.

Beginning from Pilgrim, we make a difference in the world. Our focus is perhaps a little different than the early church, but just as they did, we start locally and have a wide impact.

I was talking with a group of folks about how we keep going in our efforts to make a difference in the world. How do we stay encouraged? One of them said: You can change the world if you feel loved.

You can change the world if you feel loved.

You can change the world, perhaps, if you're in a community of care. You can change the world if your starting point is a place where you know you are valued and beloved. That's the church, our church and the early church. But before we get there, let's talk about the Ascension.

This is an in-between tale, the narrative of the Ascension, told to us only by Luke-Acts. In between Easter, and Pentecost. The level of change and disorientation that these folks faced was profound - first, they set aside their lives to follow a teacher, they did amazing things together and then he died and then he lived and then he left. Imagine if you were there with the disciples, watching Jesus go. I'd probably have said, Huh? And, what now?

Think about the previous three years that Jesus spent with this crew, Peter and James and John, and Mary and Martha and Lazarus and Mary Magdalene and the rest of the twelve. He called them from their boats, he called them to eat and feed people, he healed their sick and made them healers of others, he called them friends. Together they went through good times and bad. And now, as he is about to depart physically from them, he gives them one more commission: to make a difference in their world.

I do not think we would have Christianity if Jesus' earthly ministry had lasted three weeks. Yes, his charismatic leadership and prophetic words would have caught people's ears, but it took time to build a community that could carry on without him right there. And not only that, but one human lifetime could not fully encompass the love and justice, forgiveness and compassion, healing and grace of God. So at the very end of his concrete earthly existence, risen and yet scarred, after the last breakfast on the

beach, Jesus tells his followers: now, you are the community that is my body in the world, you have this work to take on in my name, you are witness, and you bring this love and justice, forgiveness and compassion, healing and grace to all nations. Start where you are. Start in Jerusalem.

And they, this small and intense community, began to be church: caring for each other, welcoming all, making a difference in their world. It started with Jesus, it became a community, and then it impacted the world.

Rev. Derek Weber frames it this way: “One of our values is community. We are in this together. So, while we stand, on this Ascension Sunday, looking to the Christ departing from us into heaven, we stand together. We stand side by side. And when my vision of who Christ is begins to waver, you come alongside and shore me up. When you begin to wonder if it was all a dream, I’ll be there to remind you of the reality of our experience of Christ. We are here for mutual support. Christ prays that his followers would be united, would stand together as we embark on our mission. Living the Resurrection is to celebrate the community of faith that we have become.”¹

Then, too, the church would not have happened without the wisdom and provocation of the Holy Spirit, the one sent without physical form to blow where she will and to push us out into the world, but that is next week’s Pentecost tale. Today, we consider a community that made a difference, starting in Jerusalem, and moving around the world. And today, we consider our community, that makes a difference in our world by serving God’s people in Lexington, in Eastern Massachusetts, in New England, in the US, and indeed in all nations.

Perhaps it’s presumptuous to compare the disruption and disorientation that the early church faced at the time of the Ascension with the disruption and disorientation that we have faced this last 15 months, and are still facing, but I think our ability to continue to love and serve our neighbors is grounded in our community having held together and held on to one another this year. You said it last week in worship, how you had been welcomed and supported by this community during CoVid. From care packages to a Zoom link that brought you here from seven states away, this community has continued to welcome and support each other. Community is the foundation from which making a difference is built.

¹ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/living-the-resurrection/seventh-sunday-of-easter-year-b-lectionary-planning-notes>

But we have never stopped serving our neighbors, either. From homeless folks in Cambridge to LGBT teens in MetroWest, from hungry folks in Lexington to cancelling medical debt in New England, from racial justice groups to extended mission giving, from Lexington to all nations we have served.

Now, as we find ourselves in a new place on the map,
Re-emerging from CoVid - slowly, slowly,
We're looking to how we can continue to live into our mission statement in this next season:

A welcoming home to all spiritual seekers
Making a difference in our world,
By fusing our Christian faith with everyday life and
Serving God by serving others.

What good news, that we had dozens of people give input into extended mission giving. (We're checking the results right now and you can expect to hear them in the next week.)

That's just one way for us to serve and there will be more. As we imagine and aspire for this next season, I hope you will all be praying about how Pilgrim Church (a church that is located in Lexington but made up of folks from all over) can make a difference in our world (beginning in Lexington and continuing to all nations) by Serving God by Serving others. We go into the world for the love of the world.²

We are finding ourselves on this new map. We are Pilgrims on a journey, and this is a good Pilgrimage to be on together.

Amen.

"Friends, how good and pleasant it is to be together, in person or in spirit, encouraging and consoling, provoking and inspiring. But now the service is ended. Why do you stand looking up toward heaven? Go in peace — into the world, for the love of the world!"

² Matthew Myer Boulton, writing in <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/5/17/ascension-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-ascension-sunday>

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