

Sunday, June 2, 2019
Rev. Jessica Paulsen
FPC, Corning
Luke 24:44-53
Acts 1:1-11

Looking Up

It's another one of those days—you know the ones I mean—the church holidays that I enjoy celebrating and talking about! This is one that's not always talked about, probably because it's a little odd to explain, but here we go. Today, we're celebrating the ascension of our Lord! Now, Ascension Day is technically celebrated 40 days after Easter, so it was this past Thursday. But I didn't have the opportunity to see all of you last Thursday, and so we are celebrating Ascension Day today.

Ascension Day at its most basic meaning celebrates the day that Jesus ascended into heaven after his resurrection. The ascension is mentioned throughout the New Testament, but we get the clearest depictions of the scene at the end of Luke and the beginning of Acts. This is not a coincidence. If you were not aware, scholars believe that the same person authored both the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. So, when we read the book of Acts, we must always remember how the story was told in the gospel of Luke.

Now, why is this important? It's important because we need to read the book of Acts as the continuation of the story—not a completely separate story. The author assumes that if you are reading Acts, then you have read the gospel of Luke, and so he only summarizes the gospel by pointing to “all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning” or as one commentator puts it, “all that Jesus *began* to do and to teach” (Barreto, Eric D. *Connections: Year C, Vol. 2*, Eds. Green, Long, Powery, and Rigby. Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY. 2018. 289). This is an

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important distinction to make—that the gospel was only the beginning of what Jesus was doing, because, as Barreto goes on write:

...the beginning of Acts does not narrate the permanent departure of Jesus from the narrative of Acts but his ascension and glorification. Ascension is not absence in Acts. Jesus is an active and living presence in the stories of these early followers. His name is invoked to heal. He encounters Saul on the road to Damascus. The Spirit he promises propels the disciples to become witnesses to the very edges of the world. (Ibid.)

Often the ascension is seen as a loss, something to grieve—Jesus has left this world. However, seen with this understanding we are able to recognize “the kingdom is [still] tangibly present...this is not a departure as much as it is an enthroning. It is not exit as much as it is glorification. The ascension confirms the prophetic promises Jesus speaks and lives out in the Gospel. Jesus will continue to accompany the disciples throughout Acts” (Ibid.).

This is the promise of the Holy Spirit—the presence of God, Creator, Son, and Spirit—to go with the disciples in all that they will do. This is the power the disciples were given—power that we are all given. Power to tell the world the gospel story. Power to serve as witnesses to what God has done and is continuing to do in the world—to witness to all that Jesus taught.

Now before you get all uncomfortable, wondering if that means we need to all go out to the corner and proselytize and evangelize to everyone who passes by, think about what it means to be a witness. Connors writes, “A witness tells the truth about what she sees. She gives testimony about what she has observed. Others bear responsibility for how to weight the value of that testimony and even whether it is to be believed. The witness simply tells the truth” (Ibid., 289). We are called simply to tell the truth—“the truth about where we have seen God in the

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world through Jesus and the good news that we continue to see God hewing out of suffering, injustice, and fear” (Ibid., 290).

Tell the truth. It’s a simple phrase that has recently taken on new meaning for me. Yesterday, I joined probably hundreds of others across the globe in “attending” the funeral of Rachel Held Evans. Many were able to be present physically in Chattanooga, TN, but many more us attended via livestream, virtually, for that is where Rachel did so much of her ministry—via the internet, Facebook, twitter. For those of you who may not be familiar with her, Rachel, as her website states, “[was] a New York Times best-selling author whose books included *Faith Unraveled*, *A Year of Biblical Womanhood*, *Searching for Sunday*, and others. She [wrote] about faith, doubt, and life in the Bible Belt” (<https://rachelheldevans.com/about>). She impacted thousands of people through her writing, yes, her books, but also her blog and through twitter. Rachel was a person who made you feel as if she knew you, knew all of who you were, and are, and who you could be. There are many, many testimonies out there of how Rachel encouraged others, lifted up voices of people who have been marginalized, and even, through her writing, brought so many people either to faith, or back to their faith.

We are all grieving her death—those who knew her personally, her family (husband and two kids, ages 3 and 1), and those like me who only knew her through her books and other writing. She fell ill with the flu and then experienced what has been referred to as “compounding factors” that led to constant brain seizures, a medically induced coma, multiple attempts to bring her out of the coma, and finally extensive swelling of her brain from which she died early Saturday morning, May 4, 2019. Rachel was 37 years old.

Now, you might be wondering why I’ve just told you all of this. It goes back to the original phrase, the commission we’ve been given, the power we’ve been given, tell the truth. The sermon preached in worship may vary from this manuscript in scope, formulations, and content. This manuscript is intended for personal use only. Per my agreement with the Session, I retain all ownership and copyright of these works and ask that you not make copies or distribute them without my consent.

Above her computer, where she did so much of her writing, from where she impacted so many lives, Rachel posted a note and it simply said, “Tell the truth.” It was her mantra, her motto, the foundation of what she was called to do in the world—to tell the truth about faith, about God, about what God had done and was doing in her life, to tell the truth—far and wide—in all she did, said, and wrote. Tell the truth.

The ascension reminds us that we’ve been given the power to do just that—to tell the truth. The ascension reminds us that Jesus is glorified and seated on the throne above all things and is with us each day as we tell the truth. So, we can tell the truth in the face of hate. We can tell the truth in the face disagreement. We can tell the truth to a world that has been overtaken by fear and doesn’t want to hear God’s truth of love for all, (gay or straight, male or female, white, black, or brown,) We can tell the truth of how God welcomes the stranger and shows hospitality to the immigrant. We tell the truth of what God has done and continues to do in each of our lives. We serve as witnesses for God, for Jesus, which is why at the end of the story, the disciples are asked what they are doing looking up to heaven. You can’t witness to what you have seen, if you’re still standing in the same place where you saw it. As Connors writes, “[The disciples] have work to do” (Ibid., 290). They are to go out and witness to what they have seen—they are to tell the truth.

This day, this celebration, “the ascension, then, is not so much an account of Jesus’ departure as it is a confirmation of his power, power that now accompanies the church that witnesses to his name” (Ibid.) So, let us celebrate this day. Let us celebrate this mysterious and glorious day in which we recognize the power that God has over all things. And may we go out into the world and tell the truth—as the disciples did, as Rachel Held Evans did, and as God has called us to do.

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