

Here to Stay.

Luke 24: 44-53

Ascension of our Lord

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Have you ever found yourself looking at the place where something just was, where something has maybe just disappeared, but whose image seems to linger a bit longer? Maybe some of you have had this experience that I seem to remember happening a lot with old television sets. This was long before flat screens, long before HD or even digital, I'm probably remembering a TV set that was more tubes than transistors. Not only did such old TVs have to warm up before the picture finally appeared, quite often when you turned them off the image would sort of linger there, fade out a bit, maybe even become sort of a negative of itself—black to white, white to black—until finally, you just couldn't see it any more. The image lingers, long after it's physically gone. Soon, though, you have to rely on your memory, what you remember you saw, rather than what you're seeing right now.

Or maybe you've said good-bye to a person—someone you love or care about and really don't want to go—and you've stayed right there where they left you long after they've passed out of sight. The car heads out the driveway, down the street and turns the corner and down another road. They disappears into the crowd on the other side of the security line at the airport. They're wheeled off to surgery with the big double doors closing behind them. And there you are, coffee cup in hand on the front porch, or feeling strangely alone in a crowded departure lobby, or sitting there staring at a collection of old magazines in the waiting room thinking, reflecting, imagining, their image lingering in your mind, their likeness burned into the backs of your eyes. Not only that, you tend to "see" them still in places you're used to seeing them. Even if you know they're not there anymore, you catch yourself *thinking* you see in some of those familiar places—at the ballgame, in the check-out line, getting a cup of coffee after church, across from you at the four-way stop. We strain our eyes, stretch our imagination out to a distant horizon—either real or imagined—in order to catch a glimpse of the one who is now gone, to how it was, how it used to be.

I wonder if that was the experience these disciples had on that Ascension Day forty days after the first Easter, ten days before Pentecost? Sure, Peter and other had learned their lesson from the transfiguration: they knew they couldn't stop time and build booths to make a moment last. Still, I wonder if they were caught up in the moment as Jesus took his

leave—both stunned by the fact that they could no longer see him, but also aware of the fact that this situation—this momentous, defining situation in their lives had now for intents and purposes come to an end. We read in the gospel that Jesus led these disciples out to Bethany, blessed them, and while he was blessing them he withdrew from them, was taken up into the heavens and they saw him no more. He ascended—what does that even mean? Did he float away like a helium balloon—fly up, up, and away like superman? Was it sudden, gradual, obvious, or nearly imperceptible? Did the disciples linger right there, wondering exactly what they had just witnessed, wondering what in the world to do next, what to do now, trying to imagine their life, their ministry, their calling without him to follow—at least not physically, in a bodily form?

Although we only read one of them this morning, there are actually two versions of this event in the bible—both of them written by the same person, actually, but each emphasizing something a little bit different about the story. See Luke, the one who wrote the gospel according to Luke also wrote the book of Acts—the Acts of the Apostles, right? I'm sure many of you knew that. And this story, this story of the Ascension, when Jesus ascends to the heavens, when he is no longer with them, no longer on earth, at least not in bodily form, this story appears in both versions of the story—one at the very end of Luke, and one at the very beginning of Acts. It like many authors do with sequels, the remind the reader about where they left off, but also they try to reframe that final scene of the last book to help set the stage for what's coming. So in the version from Luke we hear Jesus telling them to “stay here in the City until you have been clothed with power from on high,” reminding them that in ten short days God will send the promised Holy Spirit.”

In the Acts version, it's a bit different, as Luke recaps the gospel in order to sort of get a running start on this next book, he sums up what Jesus did during his forty days on earth, how he told them to wait there for the Spirit to come. But then he adds this part: he tells them what he wants them to do with that spirit-power. He says that they would be his *witnesses*, carrying his message out to the end of the earth. The other big difference in this second telling of the story once Jesus has ascended and is no longer there, the disciples stand there, gazing up toward heaven, when two men in white robes—kind of like the two

from the empty tomb at Easter, remember?—appear out of no where and ask “uh, guys, why are you standing here, looking up toward heaven?”

Why were they standing there, looking up toward heaven? Where they simply caught up in the moment—experiencing it fully, letting it fully sink in? Where they just getting used to having Jesus back with them in bodily form, enjoying hanging out with the risen Christ? Were they longing for the good old days, when they got to follow Jesus, when they didn't have to make too many decisions themselves, when they could hang on his every word, sit at his feet and learn from him, witness his miracles, his signs and wonders, his compassionate interactions with others?

Whatever it was they were thinking or experiencing at the moment, these two men in white, these two angelic messengers as supernatural as they must have seemed, they are the ones that ironically pull them back to reality. Why are you standing here, looking up into heaven? Remember, he told you he would be leaving you, at least in body. Remember, he told you to go back to the city. Remember, he told you to wait there—to wait for the promised Spirit that will empower you to enter God's mission. Remember, he gave you your commission—to share his good news beginning where you are, but eventually out to the ends of the earth? And remember what else he told you? That Jesus is here, even to the end of the ages. Jesus is here. Here with us. Here to stay.

Here to stay. That's the third portion of the tag line for our current capital appeal. We have been encouraged to think about Christ the King being a faith community—a faith home, even—that is formed in love, called to serve and here to stay. By giving to this appeal, we are supporting the ongoing ministry of CtK by paying off our remaining debt related to our building, providing for some repairs and upgrading that our building will require in the not too distant future, while at the same time more fully aligning some of our core ministries with our annual budget for ministry. Christ the King, and our ministries are here to stay. We are in this community for good.

Here, of course, is yet another paradox built right into our faith life, in many ways built right into our Capital Appeal, built right into our mission and ministry. Like the first

disciples, Christ has called us to stay here, right where we are, right where God has called us to be, blooming where we're planted, so to speak. Like those first disciples, we are told to anticipate the Spirit's empowering, and to expect that God's mission will continue to be revealed to us. Like them, we are told to stay put until this happens. Once it happens, however, once we hear the spirit's call to us, once we've received that empowerment, like those first disciples, we are called to be Christ's witnesses, to go out into the world and share the good news of God's redeeming love, to proclaim and enact Christ's radical hospitality, to be a community that embodies God's forgiveness and acceptance and love for everybody, to be the Body of Christ for the world—to the ends of the earth. Like those first disciples who were called to be witnesses starting in Jerusalem, then to Judea and Samaria, and finally to the ends of the earth, we are similarly called to be witnesses starting here in New Brighton, throughout Ramsey County and Minnesota, and yes, to the ends of the earth.

Put another way— Christ the King's ministry may be here to stay, but we cannot simply stay here. We have established a great base of operations one that will soon be completely debt free, but it is a starting point from which to do our ministry, a launching pad from which to enter into God's mission in the world. Our building is one of the greatest assets we have for our ministry, but it is a tool for that ministry, not the object of it.

Imagine the possibilities. Imagine what new ministries we can begin to undertake when we have paid off our building debt. Imagine what we can do *with our building* knowing that its future care is already taken care of. Imagine what our ministries can achieve when they no longer have to worry about whether they will receive adequate funding. Imagine what more we may be able to invest in for the future of our faith home.

The paradoxical good news of Ascension Day is that Christ is not far away, floating off somewhere. Christ is not gone. Christ is here. Since his ascension from earth into heaven, the body of Christ has simply taken a new form.

We are the body of Christ. We are the Church. We are a faith community formed in love, called to serve, and here to stay. Why would we just stand here, looking up into heaven?

We are called to be Christ's witnesses to the ends of the earth.