

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Fourth Presbyterian Church
Ascension/7th Sunday of Easter
May 28, 2017

In the Meantime

Acts 1:1-14

Did you celebrate on Thursday?

Throw a party? Open gifts? Go to a parade?

This past Thursday, May 25, was the Day of Ascension.

The Ascension of the Lord.

40 Days after Easter.

You did remember, right?

It's one of the big days on the Christian calendar.

Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost.

Birth, Death, Resurrection, Ascension, the giving of the Holy Spirit.

These are the big moments of salvation history.

And we have days to celebrate them every year.

This matters because

how we mark time says a lot about who we are

and what we care about.

It says a lot about what story we are living by.

Now I'm sure we all know that this is Memorial Day weekend,

because we have American culture helping us on that one.

And Memorial Day is an fine holiday to celebrate,

even an honorable one,

remembering the lives laid down for a noble cause.

But the story of America is not our ultimate story, is it?

I think we had better hope not.

There is a deeper, more foundational story by which we mark our time.

And in that story, there is one more big moment of salvation history,

but we do not have a day for it.

Do you know what it is?

Think about it...

The Return of Christ.

Or the Parousia, if you prefer the technical name.

We don't have a day to celebrate the Return of Christ

because its the one moment of salvation history that hasn't happened yet.

And we don't know when it will be.

Jesus assures us of that:

*It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set
by his own authority...*

This little exchange in Acts chapter 1, really ought to make us chuckle.
It's one of those moments where we might have to laugh to keep from crying.
After all this time and the disciples still don't get it.
And honestly, we don't get it either.
We wouldn't have gotten in then and we might not get it now.

The disciples have followed Jesus for three years.
They have suffered through his arrest, trial, and crucifixion.
They have rejoiced in the news of his resurrection.
And for 40 days the risen Jesus has been teaching them how it was necessary
that the Messiah must suffer,
in order that repentance and forgiveness of sins might be preached to the nations,
as he tells them in the last chapter of Luke.

And now they have just have one more question.
"Is today the day?"
Is this the day when you are finally going to do what we expect you to do?
What we want you to do?
"Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"

You see, their problem then, and our problem now —
and Jesus keeps confronting us with this whenever we encounter him —
is that he doesn't meet our expectations
but he challenges them.

As we have seen throughout our recent study of John,
**Our Lord doesn't give us what we want, necessarily, but what we need.
God gives us what God knows the world needs.**

But the disciples are still hopeful and they cling to their hope:
Is this the day when everything will be resolved in our favor,
when God will cut to the chase,
when the suspense will be over,
and the end will come?

But that is not what happens on the Day of Ascension.
What happens?
Jesus says that information is on a need-to-know basis,
and you do not need to know.
And he ascends out of their sight.

But before he goes,
he does give them something,
a promise and a purpose.
He promises them that his Spirit will be with them,
and his Spirit will empower them to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth.
Once again, not what they were expecting.
But what his disciples needed. What the world needed.
A promise and a purpose.

And so here we are, 2,000 years later,
remembering the Ascension, and the giving of the Holy Spirit,
which we will celebrate next Sunday on the Day of Pentecost.

This story we find ourselves in — this salvation history —
is an ongoing story which has a beginning, middle, and an end.
And we long for the end, for the destination,
with a primal, human longing.
But we are not there yet.

Karl Barth, the great Swiss theologian of the 20th century,
helps us locate ourselves in this story
by considering the words of the Apostles' Creed.

What has occurred once for all, now stands rounded off before us in the Creed
in a whole series of past tense verbs:
born of the Virgin Mary
suffered under Pontius Pilate
crucified, dead, buried,
descended, rose again...and finally...
He ascended into heaven.
All past tense.

But now, suddenly in the creed, a present tense: *sitteth*.
Jesus sitteth. In the present. We say it every week.
Jesus now sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty.

“With this,” says Barth
“we obviously pass into a *new* time which is our present time,
the time of the Church, the end-time,
inaugurated and founded by the work of Jesus Christ...”
It is “a relatively thin line in the New Testament
which speaks of Christ’s ascent into heaven.”¹

But with the Ascension the story of salvation history passes from one age to the next.
So what does it mean that Jesus, the Messiah, the Crucified and Risen One,
has ascended into heaven and now sits on the right hand of God?

We know too much about the physical universe now to think of this ascension in any literal way.
There is not really any *up there*, only *out there*.
Did Jesus go through the stratosphere into outer space?
That cannot be what this means,
as if there is some literal hand of God,
some literal right side of God out near Jupiter,
or on which Jesus sits.

What the Ascension means for us is that this Jesus —
whom we have come to know through his acts of mercy and forgiveness and healing,
and who taught us to love God by loving
our neighbors, and our enemies, ourselves,
and even our fellow disciples,
and revealed this love by being willing to lay down his life for us —
**this Jesus now has all authority in heaven and on earth,
he now is sovereign over all things.**
**This Jesus reveals to us the true nature of God
and the true meaning of human life.**

That tells us something about the power of God that is at work in the world.

That the power of God is synonymous with the grace of God.

The Almighty God who has the power to create heaven and earth

is the same God who is known in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

“Jesus Christ speaks as God and acts as God,” Barth says.

“If we would know God’s speech and action, we need only look upon this man.”

And the one thing we need to understand about our time today,
about the world as it is today.

is this ultimate reality:

This Jesus is now sitting at the right hand of God the Father.

Jesus is Lord. Christ reigns over all.

“Whatever prosperity or defeat may occur in our [time]

whatever may become and pass away, there is one constant,
one thing that remains and continues”²

Christ Jesus our Lord sits at the right hand of God, the Father Almighty.

And friends, on this Memorial Day weekend let me say as plainly as I can:

One day, the United States of America will pass out of existence.

The United States of America is not our ultimate story.

The liberty and justice for which America stands is worthy of our commitment,
and even the giving of our lives.

But the good old U. S. of A. is not the kingdom of God.

It will not last forever.

**Who will last forever is the risen and ascended Christ,
enthroned at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.**

His enthronement is the present tense reality of salvation history.

And there is a future tense:

“From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead,”
that is, the living and the dead.

There is this one present tense verb in the salvation story, that Christ reigns in heaven.

Then we begin looking to the future. To the promise of his return.

That is to say, we are living “in the meantime.”

We are living in the time between what God has done in Jesus Christ,

and what God will do, what God will complete, in Jesus Christ.
And “in the meantime” we have been given
a promise and a purpose.
We have been given a job to do
and help to do it.

It has been said facetiously — but truthfully —
that the disciples prayed for the kingdom
but they got the church.
Talk about a reality check!

Next week we will celebrate the third article of the Apostles Creed:
“I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints...”

But imagine the mental adjustment required of the disciples
on the Day of Ascension.
They are hoping for the power and glory of an earthly kingdom,
but they end the day going right back to that upper room,
gathering with each other,
with the same old cast of characters,
praying — yet again — thy kingdom come.

They find themselves grappling with what it means to live “in the meantime.”
And now, with 2000 years of church history behind us,
we still grapple with what it means to live “in the meantime.”

We shouldn't feel superior to the disciples,
as if they didn't get it but we do.
Aren't we still looking for the kingdom, for earthly power, for earthly status
for all earthly questions and struggles
to be resolved, and resolved in our favor?

We have hopes for something great, or for something to be great again.
Maybe it's America.
Maybe it's the Presbyterian Church (USA).
Maybe it's Fourth Presbyterian Church.
Maybe it's our career, or our families.

And in all of these it is worth asking whether the greatness we seek
might be a bit idolatrous.

Whatever greatness we long for,
as we stand gazing up toward heaven,
wondering when it's going to come,
the question is put to us as it was to the disciples.

*Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?
This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven,
will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.*
He will return to judge the living and the dead,
and to establish the kingdom in all of its greatness.

But in the meantime... In the meantime... there is work to do.
And that work requires that we turn our gaze from heaven
back to earth,
back to the community in which we find ourselves,
back to the brothers and sisters we are called to be with.

In a sense, what Jesus said to his disciples
was what John F. Kennedy said to America:
"Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country."
Jesus says to his disciples,
"Ask not what my church can do for you, but what you can do for my church."

I am coming back, and in the meantime, you have a job to do.

"The interim time between His earthly existence and His return in glory...
is the time of great opportunity, of the task of the Church towards the world;
it is the time of mission."³

Our mission is to be the community of Jesus Christ in the world.
A community that gathers for prayer.
A community that proclaims the forgiveness of sin and a new way of life.
A community that is sent into the world
to bear witness to the one who heals,
and shows mercy,
and loves,
and who offers humble service to humankind.

So let's stop gazing idly up,
and look around us.

We have work to do.

¹ Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959) 124

² Barth, 126

³ Barth, 128