

Ascension Lutheran Church

Pastor Godkin's Sermon for the week of May 24, 2009

The Ascension Gives Purpose and Joy to Life (Acts 1:1-11)

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Our text is from the first chapter of Acts:

When they had come together, they asked Him (Jesus), "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." And when He had said these things, as they were looking on, He was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as He went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw Him go into heaven."

This is the text.

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, what is your hobby? In our society we are blessed with the opportunity to take up any number of hobbies. Entertainment and sports are a big deal. In Montreal we have professional teams such as the Canadians in hockey, the Alouettes in football, and the Impact in soccer. There are hundreds of sports to get hooked on really. We generally like to be on teams too. If you have ever played on a team you probably felt a sense of purpose as your team all worked together toward a common goal. We can get quite involved as well when we watch sports or a TV show. Some people live almost vicariously through their teams or TV shows sometimes. The TV show, American Idol, for example, is the highest rated show on television. Every week people tune in to cheer on their favourite singer and last week it reached its pinnacle when the winner was finally announced (Chris).

And yet after the big event, whether it is a championship game or the season finale of a TV show, there is inevitably a letdown afterward. The focus and sense of purpose is gone and you have to find something else to do, something else that gives you a sense of joy. This is true in just about everything we do in this world. We can find purpose in things like home improvements as well, at least for awhile. Hobbies are good, but the purpose and the joy they bring us lasts only a little while.

Today, I want to talk about the one thing that gives a deeper sense of purpose; that gives a sense of joy and can last a long, long time. This past Thursday was Ascension Day, the day we celebrate Jesus' Ascension into heaven. The Ascension is an important event; the early church found it to be so importance that it was included in our confession of faith in the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. When our parish was

founded 80 years ago we also recognized the importance of this event and our church was named Ascension Lutheran Church.

The words that accompanied the Jesus' Ascension are connected to the event and show us the purpose that His Ascension can give to our lives. And as we look at Jesus' words and actions we look to find something; in Him we can find a sense of purpose to our lives that we can't find anywhere else. Things in this world are only temporary and the joy and purpose we get from them last only a little while. And so we find the ultimate sense of purpose not in looking down into this world. Instead, we can look up, to our ascended Lord who gives the permanent and ultimate meaning and purpose to life.

Today we find Jesus with His disciples one last time. Jesus calls them together to give His important last words to them. We find the disciples still confused about everything that has happened in the last 40 days. They asked Jesus if He was now going to restore the Kingdom of Israel; in other words, to make Israel a strong and powerful nation in the world as it was in the past. But Jesus essentially told them not to think about those things. Instead, He directed them to their deeper life's purpose.

Over the last 3 years their purpose had been to follow Him, receive His teachings, and watch Him fulfill the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament. Their purpose was to witness His suffering and death and His resurrection from the dead. Now the time had come for a new direction. With the help of the Holy Spirit, which Christ would send in a few days' time, they would understand what all these incredible things meant.

Jesus says, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." Their life's purpose was now to witness to the things they had seen and learned from Jesus.

As a Christian today, that is your purpose too. It is true we are not first hand eye witnesses of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection and we did not see Him with our own eyes. However, through the word of the Bible we also see these things to be true. Through the eyes of faith in the Words of Holy Scripture we watched as He suffered and died for our sins and rose from the dead. We heard how He ascended into heaven and how He sent the Holy Spirit so we can understand the meaning of these things. Through Jesus there is forgiveness and hope of eternal life. And through Him we have meaning and direction to our lives today.

Sometimes, we get confused about the purpose of our lives. God has placed you on this planet for a reason. True we have many earthly purposes: to be a good son or daughter, to be a good parent, a good spouse, to look for ways to help people and make this world a better place. These are all noble purposes and we look for God to bless us to grow in these callings. But there is a deeper purpose to life; and this purpose has eternal significance, it has long lasting value. We find this ultimate meaning and purpose when we look up to the ascended Lord Jesus Christ.

God has placed you on this planet to witness to Christ, to show and tell what Jesus has done. We do this with God's help, by His grace. If we ask Him to guide us He does. He

is faithful. We witness to Christ first by showing His love to others. This is agape love in Greek. It means sacrificial love, the love that gives without expecting anything in return. This is the love that Jesus showed when He laid down His life for sinners; that's you and me and everybody. And it's the kind of love that we must seek to show to others.

The second part of witnessing is talking about what Jesus has done, sharing this good news - having conversations about the deeper things of life, inviting someone to church. Jesus has died for all mankind and whoever believes in Him will be saved. It's amazing news. He has risen, He has ascended and He is coming back. God wants us to be witnesses of these things to others.

After giving these final instructions to His disciples, Jesus performed one last miracle before their eyes. He lifted up His hands and blessed them and He was lifted up into the sky and was hidden by a cloud. Likely the disciples' jaws dropped open as they witnessed this incredible event. They stood there in shock for a moment perhaps. Then God sent two angels to strengthen them. The angels said, "This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw Him go into heaven."

So what did the disciples do? Luke's Gospel says "they worshiped Jesus and returned to Jerusalem with great joy". It says they were "continually in the temple blessing God." Now this is an amazing change. Before, they were cowering in a locked room afraid of the Jewish authorities. Now they were worshipping in public. Their fear had turned to joy. They now knew for certain that Jesus was the Almighty Lord and God and King of heaven and earth and that everything He said was true. They found their joy in that they would see Him again, that He would return and make all things new. They found joy in their Saviour.

Friends, if you are looking for a sense of joy and purpose in your life that is deeper than the temporary things of this world then look to where the disciples looked. Look up to Jesus. Yes, there will be setbacks in our life, there will be things that will make us sad, that will make us angry or hurt or depressed. But for a believer in Christ, underneath the anger or sadness there is a deeper sense of joy, of ultimate purpose through Jesus. When something bad happens to you, you can say, "I know God is not punishing me, He has paid for my sins". You can know that God will use the trials of this life for a good purpose for you. And you can know that this while life is not perfect and bad things will happen, there is a better life coming and God will give you strength for what you need in the meantime. This is the joy the disciples had, may God grant this same joy to you.

Friends, today we have watched Jesus ascend into heaven. Today He has reminded you of your purpose. He has shown us where true, lasting joy is found, in no where else but in Him. Let's not hesitate to seek to find ways to share this good news with others. Our ascended Lord is surely with you always. Amen. The peace of God that surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.