

“Departures and Arrivals”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Eastertide, Ascension Sunday, June 5, 2011

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Texts: Luke 24: 44-53; Acts 1: 1-11

Luke

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." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, 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, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. 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." Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Acts

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to

leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰ While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. ¹¹ They said, "Men of Galilee, 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."

"Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"

Questioning the Lord is fine.

Come, let us bring our questions, our concerns and troubles and queries to God.

The passage from Acts has the disciples standing with Jesus

soon after the resurrection.

Jesus has returned from the dead,

he has shown them his pierced hands and feet and side,

he has broken bread with them, forgiven Peter,

and offered them communion on the beach.

Now it is time for the Christ to depart,

to ascend to heaven and stand at the right hand of God.

Some of the best parenting advice I was ever given

was to practice long hellos and short goodbyes.

Drop your child off at school, at day care, at nurseries, at college, say good
bye, and exit stage left.

Save the long conversation for when you return and reconnect and say hello.

Practice short good byes and long hellos;

this departure of Christ from earth and arrival in heaven

looks like he learned the same parenting skill.

Still, the disciples raise one more question just before Jesus departs.

“Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”

Have you ever been tempted to want to slip back into a pleasant past,
to relive the good times,
to put in the energy and effort to restore the past
in lieu of facing the challenges of the present
or the reality of an uncertain future?

This is especially tempting when the present is especially tough,
or the future is a mist.

Sometimes when we slip into that mode it feels like trying to drive
while only looking in the rear view mirror.

Exciting, maybe, yet living backwards can be dangerous for the soul.

The disciples were raised with the stories of King Saul and King David,
Sabbath school lessons on Solomon and all his glory,
and they knew about the heyday of Israel,
when the land flowed with milk and honey.

Ah, those were the days.

Maybe, they hoped, Jesus would be the one to restore the kingdom to Israel!

Their question is political, theoretical, and temporal.

They are tribe-focused.

They are thoroughly grounded in a self-centered approach

to the human condition,

one that is nationalistic in flavor and narcissistic in world view.

They are delightful people of faith, close followers of Jesus,

yet at this moment in time

their spiritual approach is to see the world as a mirror,

reflecting back to them only their needs,

only their own wants and dreams.

Sure, Jesus, they appear to be saying,

we were with you when you shared the Gospel

with tax collectors and sinners, with lepers and beggars,

with soldiers and priests, with Samaritans and Sadducees.

Yes, sir, we were with you when you blessed some bread and fish

and then fed 3,000 people, and later 5,000 people!

regardless of their color or creed or gender or orientation

or nationality or primary language or culture

or faith expression.

You didn't ask whether they had been baptized or believed;

you simply showed us that everyone belonged.

You showed us what it means to love.

Love.

Yes, we were with you when you taught that the greatest commandments
are to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and
strength,

and to love your neighbor as yourself.

We were there.

Good times.

But still, Jesus, inquiring minds want to know:

Is now the time you are going to restore the kingdom to Israel?

Are you going to bring back the good old days

when everyone was like us, believed like us,

looked like us, smelled like us, spoke like
us,

ate and drank and worshiped the same
God as us?

Is now the time when you will make life simpler, not harder;

when you will make our path straighter, not more crowded;

when you will bless us with uniformity, not
diversity,

with fanaticism, not tolerance.

Jesus hears their question.

He receives their question, their concern, their longing,
even their temporal nature.

As we consider Jesus' answer to their question,
consider his context as well.

Here is the Christ, the Messiah, looking for closure,
ready to depart the earth and ascend into heaven,
having spent the past three years
on calling and training and fostering disciples of
Christ;

here is the Risen Lord ready to pass on to a small group of
followers

the whole mantle of Christian servant leadership,
and just at that moment he gets hit

with the reality that there is no Plan B.

The disciples -- the same ones who are looking to God

for answers to misguided questions

in such a critical moment in human history
-- are it.

A lesser god would have been deflated, or snapped an angry retort,
or thrown up two hands and said, "You're on your own!"

Instead, Jesus acknowledges his disciples and their right and ability

to ask any question, any question at all,
and then he redirects their energy and focus.

Are we not *living* the questions?

Do you think that the daily questions of our lives
give expression and utterance to the crux of the matter
that matters most to us?

Do you find that your deepest questions are a way to address
your deepest fears and concerns and joys
about where our feet and faith meet on the road of life?

Do you bring your questions to God?

Please do.

Please do.

Clearly Jesus Christ, no matter what might be on his agenda or calendar,
makes time to answer your questions, prayers, and wonderings.

Just as he did for the disciples.

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

⁸ *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you;
and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem,*

*in all Judea and Samaria,
and to the ends of the earth.”*

Two points:

First, the power of the Holy Spirit is given to help us in such a time as this.

There is only so much energy and effort and vision

that you can live out and give out in any given day.

Be present in the times you have.

Please, do not be concerned or waste energy worrying or being anxious

about the times or periods that God has set by God's own authority.

That part of the plan is not for you or me to know.

It is for God's eyes only.

Let it be.

Let it go.

Billy Joel took a shot at this temptation to want to grow back in time

in his song, "Keeping the Faith"

You can get just so much

*From a good thing
You can linger too long
In your dreams
Say goodbye to the
Oldies but goodies
Cause the good ole days weren't
Always good
And tomorrow ain't as bad as it seems*

Enjoy the oldies but goodies and the photo albums and memories;
however, don't let it prevent you from focusing
on what you can do and be today.

Enjoy the times in which you live and move and have your being;
release the temptation to invest energy
to restore or return to another day and time.

The idea of a simpler, easier, trouble-free past
which can be restored is a myth, a falsehood, a fairy tale
to divert us from dealing with difficulties which we can and must
address.

Each era has its own strengths and challenges.

Accept that this is the lot you and I are given;
this is the hand we have been dealt;

so let's make the best of it with God and one another.

Jesus answers his disciples' question

with a spiritual, gentle, yet powerful reminder.

Jesus departs with words of wisdom, saying, in effect:

“Let go of the nostalgia. Look around and ahead with clear eyes.

Let me remind you what your purpose is:

you will do this thing I have given you!

You will be empowered! (*Can you imagine him pumping his fist?*)

You will be my witnesses! (*Can you envision his eyes shining with joy?*)

Your faith works will be cosmic,

and countless, precious lives and nations and the world

will be transformed by the power of love...in you!

You need not think that you are alone or powerless!

Be aware that “*you will receive power*

when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.”

Jesus' Word leads us to Point Two.

Christ counts on us to act.

Jesus said, “*You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you;*

*and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem,
in all Judea and Samaria,
and to the ends of the earth.”*

As Jesus prepares to depart

he is bringing his own earthly ministry to a close,

and as he arrives in heaven

he is beginning a new thing:

people of faith empowered with the Spirit
of God, witnessing here, there, and to the
ends of the earth.

And this blessing of power and purpose raises questions for us to consider.

What do you need to bring to closure in your life?

What aspect of your life, what relationship in your life, what habit or
addiction or diversion do you need to bring to closure?

What is God directing and guiding you to let go, to set aside,

to leave behind, to establish as a “used to”,

as a part of your past that no longer needs to be central in your
present?

Like the song by Semisonic:

“Every new beginning comes from some other beginnings end.”

As you let go and let God help you move toward some closure,

what do you need to begin? Where? With whom?

Jesus says to the disciples, “You can and you will do this!

You will start something new!

You will be my witnesses,

not only among those who know you and love you
already, but also and especially

*in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the
earth.”*

Jesus takes our small-minded, temporal, self-centered worries and anxieties,

and show us that God’s world view is not nationwide;

it is global and universal

and knows no bounds or borders,

refusing to draw lines in the sand.

God has the power and confidence to send us out to do a new thing, to act,

not to be retreads or restorers of myths.

Think about the places and people among whom you see God at work today.

God is where justice is being worked for;

God is seen where mercy is made real,

God is experienced where kindness is a way of life,

God is known where healing is extended to people

regardless of their income or tax bracket or insurance coverage.

Discern, then act.

Do you see a gap in the world today,

a void where God is missing,

a vacuum that needs an infusion of love and hope?

Now imagine that you are available to act.

Believe that God will not let you fail.

That gap, that void, that vacuum, that hunger, that hurt

that you can see and feel and care about,

my friends, that place and time and relationship

is where God is calling you to begin,

to start, to commence, to enter into the
fray

and say, "I am empowered by the Spirit.

I will be a witness for Christ.

I can and I will do this!

Here am I, Lord, send me!"

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!