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Colorado Springs, Colorado
May 8, 2016 Mothers Day/Ascension Sunday
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“Began to Do”

Acts 1:1-11 1In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, 2until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. 3After 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. 4While 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; 5for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” 6So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” 7He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 8But 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.” 9When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. 11They 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.”

I want you to think for a moment of a time in your life when you have been really, really **confused**. Maybe you were driving in a strange city, trying to find a place to park and you come across this unhelpful sign. *Confusion*. Or perhaps you are driving just south of



Woodmen and Academy and find yourself in this parking lot with this sign (which I've shared with you before) but having no idea what that sign wants you to do. *Confusion*. Maybe you don't fly very frequently and when you do it is almost always on a holiday when



the airport is crowded and you heed those warnings to get there three hours early, finally fight your way to an overpriced parking lot, go inside the terminal only to find those holiday crowds now mean that you have absolutely no idea where to go or where the line

starts. *Confusion*. When our son Andrew was about seven, he invited a friend to have dinner and spend the night with us. We went out for Chinese food but Andrew's friend had never eaten Chinese before.

Andrew ordered Moo Shu Pork and his friend said "What's that?" Andrew responded "It's like a Chinese



burrito. Every country has its own kind of burrito and Mu Shu Pork is the Chinese kind of burrito." The look on Andrew's friend's face? *Confusion*.

Our sermon series of these past few weeks has focused on the Book of Acts and how its stories could offer us new life in our thinking about some very important issues – including racism and immigration and the language we use and other difficult topics – Today, though, I want to return to the very beginning of the Book of Acts and its story of Jesus' last moments on earth. It's a fitting place to end this series and it's a fitting story to look at before next Sunday's celebration of Pentecost. And I can only imagine that the eleven disciples gathered there with Jesus were themselves also very, very confused. After all, what a confusing few weeks it had indeed been. First there was the triumph of Palm Sunday. Then, not five days later, the unspeakable horror of the crucifixion. Then the consternation at the tomb – he's not here, but he's alive, or did they steal his body, or....? Then Jesus appears not once but several times. He joins them in that upper room where Thomas touched his sides to prove for himself. And then he leaves again. Confusion continues. He joins Peter and company on the beach, where Peter had gone back to fishing, sadly chastened and confused after these events in which he'd played his own ashamed role. And then that grace-filled moment when Jesus forgave him even though he'd denied Him three times and told Peter he yet had work for him to do. Yes, it would be an understatement to say that it had been a confusing few weeks!

And now today, in Jesus' very last post-resurrection appearance, one of those moments of confusion that the last six weeks had been so full of once again visits the disciples as they stand there watching Jesus depart from them for the last time, completely befuddled about what to make of it. The story tells us that Jesus was "*lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.*" Now, I have to say, that these days many congregations don't spend much time on this story. Why? Well, in our modern scientific age it can seem almost a little embarrassing, certainly a little odd. Unlike those ancient folks 2000 years ago, we don't believe in a literal three-story universe, with hell below our feet and heaven "up there." Modern science has taught us that not only is the universe unimaginably big, but that the very idea of "up" is relative to wherever you happen to be. And geologists have taught us, and as my wife Barbara and I learned first-hand while living in Hawaii, underneath our feet is molten earth, not some sort of locale where the damned somehow live on. So we moderns are sometimes just not quite sure what to do with this story.

And yet it intrigues me that in the first centuries of the Church's life, what became Ascension Day was second in importance only to Easter. Christmas didn't even start to be celebrated in the church until 500 C.E. or so, but from its earliest days the church celebrated Jesus' resurrection and his ascension with songs and worship and partying. The early church thought the Ascension so important that it became a part of the Church's earliest creeds¹ So we ought not dismiss the Ascension story too quickly as a quaint story that has little to say to us, leftover from a time when folks didn't know much science. For what is important to this story is not Jesus' celestial elevator ride up into the clouds of heaven, but the ***theological meaning*** of this story. As with so many Biblical stories that are couched in concepts of the day, the point is not to take them *literally*, but to take them *seriously*. So what **does** this story teach us – we who,

¹ John S. McClure, <http://www.pcusa.org/today/believe/past/may02/ascension.htm>

like those disciples, are also sometimes stuck in confusion, whipsawed between up and down, left and right, clear and cloudy, not knowing where to look what to do, befuddled by the disorientation all around us.

Let me cut to the chase: I think the most central theological point of the story of the Ascension is this: Trust Jesus. Trust God. **Particularly** in times of disorientation and confusion, *particularly* in times when you can't tell up from down, when the world around us seems to have gone mad, that is the time to trust Jesus, to trust God. One writer says this:

The world, community, the family the human heart: these are the beautiful and complicated arenas in which our lives unfold. Wherever you look, there is trouble and wonder, pain and beauty, restoration and darkness – sometimes all at once. Yet amid the confusion, if you look carefully, in nature or in the kitchen, in ordinariness or in mystery, beyond the emotional muck we all slog through, you'll find it....: a path, some light to see by, moments of insight, courage, or buoyancy. In other words, grace.²

In other words, in times of disorientation, in times of *life's* confusion, we find your way forward by trusting in God, trusting in Jesus and refusing to trust in all those other things that the world says to trust instead: the demonization, the hatreds, the xenophobia, the fearfulness. All of these things, as we have seen these past few weeks, sometimes so seductively try to get us to give in to them, but the story of the Ascension is our final reminder from the story of Jesus to not let those things rule us and own us and our final assurance that those hateful and hurtful things will not win and do not have the final word.

But that likely leads us to ask **how** the Ascension story provides such assurance that love will win out and not the hateful things of this world. Let's look more closely,

²Preface to Anne Lamott's Grace (Eventually)

then. The theological meaning of the Ascension story is the assurance that it is finally **God** who is the sovereign, the ruler, the king of creation; it is the guarantee, if you will, that *Jesus Christ* rules and not something else. In fact, paradoxically, almost, the fact that Jesus **ascends** into heaven is the very sign that guarantees that he is always with us, always sovereign, here on earth! Why? Well, consider how the Gospel of Mark tells this story; Mark always much more terse than the other Gospel writers, simply says *“After the Lord Jesus had spoken to [the disciples], he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God.”* *“At the right hand of God.”* Do you know where that phrase comes from? Do you know what it means? In Jesus’ time, it was said that *“the right hand of Caesar”* was everywhere. It was a figure of speech that meant that there was no place in the known world where the power of Rome did not reach. So for Jesus to be depicted as ascending to God, seated on God’s right hand, is really a symbolic way of saying that it is Jesus that is Lord of life, and not any other lesser and more imperfect thing. Because Jesus Christ is at the right hand of God, it is finally the power of love that is ultimate in this world. Jesus Christ is at the right hand of God, and therefore the God will never abandon us.

My friends, the Ascension is good news; it is the guarantee that we can trust in the Lord, that it is Christ who is sovereign and not something else. Even amidst our disorientation and confusion and temptation to trust in other things, the Ascension reminds us that

- It is not the quagmire of wars and ethnic and national hatreds that are finally the most powerful thing.
- It is not the pains and disappointments and hurts and sorrows of relationships that are strained and brittle and hurting and which suck the joy from us that must rule our lives.
- It is not the grief of mortality and death and opportunities lost and bad choices

made that must forever be our ruler.

-- It is not the culture's too-prevalent xenophobia and fear of strangers and love of slogan-slinging and demonizing "the other" that must rule our lives.

No, the Ascension story was recognized by the early church as testifying that in all these things it is and will be God through Christ who is the most powerful, who will rule our lives and the lives of this world.

Writer Anne Lamott says this about what all this means:

My experience of life is that it's ... not predictable. It's not pretty. It's messy. You can have very deep faith and still experience deep disappointment and confusion. Jesus doesn't promise to take away the pain, confusion, or disappointment. But he'll enter into it with you and keep you company till you cross over to the other side.³

The Ascension calls us indeed to trust God, to know that God through the Spirit of Christ walks with us. The Ascension calls us to remember and to proclaim that God and nothing else, none of those other things that seek to rule in our hearts is Lord. That's the assurance of our faith. But there is, as always, also that word of challenge. Did you notice it? Luke says that he wrote his story in order to show what "Jesus **began** to do and teach." What Jesus **began** to do. It's an odd phrase. It would have been grammatically simpler just to say "what Jesus did." But that's not what Luke wrote – because Jesus' story becomes our story and so that story is not yet finished. That's the word of challenge. Jesus began the story but you and I are called to continue it. For as one preacher powerfully puts it: Jesus'

...work in the world isn't finished yet.... His work isn't finished as long as babies starve and armies march and families break up and children run away and

³Quoted in *How to Be Like Jesus: Lessons on Following in His Footsteps* by Pat Williams, James D. Denney, Jim Denney, Jerry B. (FRW) Jenkins (npp: Faith Communications, 2003), p. 129. Online at <http://books.google.com/books?id=tC17RoTWTW4C>

parents abuse their children and students carry guns to school. His work isn't finished as long as Satan still rules this earth and sin reigns in the heart of [humanity]. His work isn't finished while the wicked triumph and drug lords make a fortune with their foul merchandise. His work isn't finished when people of different races hate each other and [human beings] kill each other because of skin color.

The wonderful work of Jesus Christ is begun. The Ascension story is the assurance that that work is under the rule of God, even amid life's confusion. And it is the challenge to you and to me to help continue the work that Jesus began to do. How might you do so in your life?