

“Hey, you guys – what are you standing there looking at? Don’t you have things to do?” That is basically what the two messengers in white said to the disciples “left behind” that day as Jesus ascended to the heavens.

What they did next would be critical.

- Would they do as they had done before—would they hide away behind closed doors?
- Would they conclude that the “Jesus thing” was over and go back to fishing, tax collecting, or whatever they were doing before they left it all to follow Jesus?
- Would they listen to Jesus’ “final words”—follow his call / their commissioning to continue the work that he had begun?
- Would they be Jesus’ witnesses, proclaiming “*repentance and forgiveness of sins... to all nations, beginning [right there where they were] in Jerusalem*” and spreading out “*to all Judea and Samaria... to the ends of the earth*”?

To follow this call would take them into new, uncharted waters. Could they really do what Jesus was asking them to do? Would they?!

The importance of the ASCENSION is not just what it meant for Jesus—although that is important... but what it meant for his disciples, too—for those who stood there watching as Jesus disappeared into the clouds / who didn’t want to look away... AND for those of us who follow in their footsteps.

As you know, this event—Jesus’ ASCENSION—is one of the basic tenets of our faith. In our creeds, we say: “...*he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father...*” But what exactly are we saying when we affirm this belief—that Jesus ascended into heaven ...and now sits at the right hand of God the Father? Why is this statement of faith important?

Jesus’ resurrection makes real the good news that death does not have the last word. Easter proves that God’s power to give life is greater than the power of sin and death. The ASCENSION takes that good news one step further. Jesus is given the place of honor / the position of power and authority over all the earth. He comes full circle, you might say—in the words of Paul “...”*[God] has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.*”

You see, the ASCENSION announces Jesus as Lord and King of all the earth—NOT as a distant memory or some far-off hope, BUT as a living reality here and now... through whom God is at work to do a new thing. Jesus now reigns over all creation—which means that all creation belongs to him... and through the Spirit, he is present throughout all creation.

Contrary to what some assume, the ASCENSION does not put Jesus “out of play” until he returns “at the end.” If we think that Jesus’ ASCENSION means that he is now removed from us and our daily experiences, then we have missed the point. Jesus physically departs... so that he can fully exercise his power and authority over all things... all places... all powers.

Jesus’ ASCENSION does not mean the end of Jesus’ ministry... or his absence / the suspension of God’s activity in our world. His ASCENSION is not the end of the story—it simply initiates the next chapter in God’s story of salvation.

On that day, the responsibility for spreading the good news of Jesus... for feeding the hungry... for welcoming the stranger / immigrant... for offering forgiveness and healing in his name... was handed on to Jesus’ followers. And it has been that way ever since!

Jesus knew that *if* his work / ministry was to go on, it would be up to his followers to do it. The “body of Christ” was no longer his own physical body on earth; it was, from that point forward, the body of believers that we know as “the church.”

Jesus knew that they wouldn’t be able to do it on their own—but then, they wouldn’t have to. He told them that his Spirit would empower them and guide them. That’s why he told them to *wait*...

You know, I’ve often skipped over this little detail—this time of *waiting*. I think many of us do. But I think it makes an important point about how God works with us.

The Holy Spirit could have come immediately upon Jesus’ followers after his ASCENSION into heaven. But God waits—rather, God has Jesus’ followers *wait*... perhaps to help them learn (or at least start to learn) that they are / need to be a community that *waits* for God—to empower... guide... initiate... lead...

Notice: this *waiting* time is NOT a time of passivity – just sitting around thinking about the past (the good old days)... or the future (as they envisioned it). Luke tells us that they were “*constantly devoting themselves to prayer*...” (which to me means that they were seeking God’s input / direction / guidance).

They were expectant—they expected God to act! They were attentive / ready—for what was yet to come.

As I see it, this was the first great act of the apostles—that they *waited*, as Jesus commanded them, for the Spirit to empower them and lead them forward...

Too often, I fear, we blunder ahead – according to our own agendas / our own timelines... assuming we can just go off and put things into action in whatever way occurs to us – forgetting to ask God if it is what God wants us to do.

Here we are reminded... that “the church”—that’s us!!—is to be a community that *waits* upon God... that prays for the presence and power and guidance of the Holy Spirit in its decisions and ministry!

Dear friends, the ASCENSION is the “commissioning” of Jesus’ followers to take on his ministry... to continue what he began... to BE “the body of Christ” / “the church” in the world—feeding... healing... caring... listening... advocating for... sharing... making God’s love and mercy and justice known!

Like it or not, we cannot just sit back... and excuse ourselves from action / service in Jesus’ name... thinking (hoping) that someone else will do the work / ministry we are all called to do. Our baptism commissions us / sends us out as disciples to serve Christ by serving others. Through the waters of baptism, we are empowered with the Holy Spirit and sent out—to the crossroads of life—to live out God’s mission... to *BE* God’s people in the world... witnessing to / inviting others into the life-transforming forgiveness and grace of the cross.

What does that look like? What does “the church at the crossroads of life” look like?

- A group of volunteers giving up a Saturday morning to show up at the High School to package food for those in need through Food for Kidz... or a group of HS / MS students volunteering at Beyond Blessed Food Panty on a Wednesday afternoon / evening.
- Congregations supporting the important / much-needed work of larger church / organizations like Lutheran Disaster Response, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Resettlement, ELCA World Hunger and so many others... that serve the needs of others not just in our own country but across the globe.

- Individuals in conversation with / sending letters to their representatives / senators regarding access to healthcare, budget decisions, voting rights, and other important issues that come to the forefront—letting their faith (rather than their own personal agendas) inform and direct their role / responsibility as citizens of the U.S. / the world.
- A congregation that helps to address and respond to the needs in our own community – through support of the Baraboo Area Homeless Shelter, Beyond Blessed Food Pantry, Kids Ranch, Boys and Girls Club, etc.
- Individuals who volunteer to deliver Meals-on-Wheels, who spend that little extra time talking those who so often sit alone in their homes... individuals who take the time to visit those in care facilities / the home bound, etc., offering a smile / a word of hope / a bright spot in a lonely day.
- Congregations that are willing to wrestle with / engage in deep and difficult discussions about how faith informs and impacts real-life issues like climate change / environmental stewardship; human sexuality; racism; racial and religious injustice; global crises, etc. – even when we *know* that we will not all agree / that our membership reflects a wide spectrum of viewpoints / understandings.
- Individuals that seek to build bridges that bring people together rather than walls / barriers that deepen the divide between people...
- Congregations that continue to prayerfully and intentionally discern what God is calling them to do... how God is leading them to *BE* “the body of Christ” in the world – in this time and place... who are open and attentive to the many opportunities we are given (each and every day) to look beyond ourselves and serve the needs of others... in big ways and small ways – for the sake of the world God so loves.

This is our calling! This is our mission!

Jesus’ ASCENSION reminds us that we are blessed and commissioned to participate in his on-going work in this world!

*“I need you—ALL of you—to continue the work I began!”* Jesus says to us today. *“That’s why I gave you my Spirit in the waters of baptism – to guide you and help you to do what needs to be done. That’s why I strengthen and nourish you with my Word of scripture / my own body and blood in Holy Communion – so you can continue my work / my ministry – wherever you are... wherever you go. Don’t just stand / sit there—gazing up to heaven! You are my witnesses! Go... witness... and serve in my name! Let me light and love shine through your actions and words – today... and every day!”*

Dear friends, we will never change the world by simply “going to church”... only by BE-ing the church!