**You will be my witnesses**

May 21, 2023; Seventh Sunday of Easter

(The Sunday following the Ascension)

RCL Year A: Acts 1:6-14; Psalm 68: 1-10; 33-36;

1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11; John 17:1-11

St. Matthew’s, Sunbury; The Rev. Dina Carter Ishler, Deacon in Charge

***May we be faithful to your call to be your witnesses in this world until the time of your coming again~ God our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer,* Amen*.***

# On Thursday, the Church celebrated the Ascension of Christ, one of the principal feasts of the Church- the occasion on which the risen Christ is taken into heaven after appearing to his followers for forty days of post-resurrection appearances and fellowship and teaching. It is the final and complete elevation of his human nature to divine glory and into the nearer presence of God, bringing to fulfillment the prayer of Jesus in today’s Gospel as spoken in the company of the disciples BEFORE his resurrection: “So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.” And in the words of the Collect for Ascension Day, we hear the promise that the ascension of Jesus is not a distancing of intimate relationship but actually the opposite: “Mercifully give us faith to perceive that, according to his promises, *he abides with his Church on earth, even to the end of the ages.”*

This is at once both an ending and a beginning, as is everything that we will ever experience, a model for our own life’s invitation to journey onwards with purpose and conviction and honor all that has come before. This is farewell to the physical presence of Jesus as companion and teacher in the flesh- not only to these past forty days of sudden appearances and astonishing revelation, of walks together and shared meals and final moments of formation and calling- but to **all** the moments that since the Incarnation have shared with us, through the earthly body of Jesus, everything about what it means to be human. And it is also a ***beginning***- a beginning of the fullness of what it will mean for Christ to be both risen and ascended, established as Lord over all creation and able to be fully present in all things through the indwelling Holy Spirit. If our images of Jesus ascending give us the sense that God is now somehow more removed from our daily lives and experiences, then we’ve probably missed the point of the Ascension, at least as the book of Acts describes it to us.

Through these stories of the very first believers that we tell and retell to each other, we catch a glimpse of what it means to share in God’s very life: that through our oneness with God, this **gift** of abiding in God’s love, through God’s Spirit- so beautifully described for us in John’s Gospel- will be given to us for always. As the people of God in this and every age, we hold the tension of this ‘both/and’ moment as the foundation of everything we are and everything we do: we seek the presence of the Holy Spirit not only to “strengthen us and exalt us to that place where our Savior Christ has gone before”, as today’s Collect says, ***but we also rely on this same Spirit to guide us to a life lived here on earth that brings the Good News of the Gospel alive among all people and in every place.***“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you”, Jesus tells the apostles just before his ascension, ***“and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”***

I do believe, with all my soul, that the truest work of the Holy Spirit is to show us how we are called to be God’s hands and feet in our world, to guide us into communion with God’s presence in every living moment and to invite us to share, through our witness, to God’s mission of mercy and reconciliation. Throughout our season of Eastertide readings in the book of Acts, we have heard story after story of a community learning to do life together- one community gathered in the name of the risen and ascended Christ ***yet sent out*** to spread the Good News to even those very ends of the earth: ***The apostolic witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ must always be at the heart of the Church's mission.*** And it is by mission that the Church lives out God’s purpose in the world: “**you** will be my witnesses,” says Jesus, “**you**.” As the Body of Christ alive and at work in our world, **we** are the Church, **we** are the ones called to show the creational love of God, the redemptive love of Jesus, and the guiding love of the Holy Spirit as a vital and ever-present reality in our lives and our communities. Witnessing is far more than what we do and where we do it- it is first and foremost a way of being: **we** are the ones whose lives will tell the story- **we** are the ones called to offer love and compassion in ways that are faithful to the soul of God’s mission, which is always **Love** for the world God made and then called “good”- **we** are the ones whom the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, will guide into all truth. **We** are the ones who will make God’s kingdom visible and known during our earthly lives in ways that point to the joys of heaven.

When we do this, we embrace the fullness of Divine Love known to us as Father, Son and Spirit- the Love which has both redeemed us and filled us with the longing to share in proclaiming this very same love. Looking ahead to our conversation in two weeks on Trinity Sunday, mission is first and always the activity of our triune God- the Father sends the Son, the Father and Son send the Spirit, the Father, Son and Spirit send the Church out into the world. In the book of Acts, we have as our model the newly-born church learning to follow the Son by the leading of the Spirit: “We are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him” (Acts 5:32). As did the first apostles, we become the witnesses we have been called to be by sharing the life-giving narrative of salvation with those to whom the Spirit sends us- gathering, proclaiming, praying, blessing, breaking bread together, and finally going forth to care for the needs of others as we have been charged with doing.

Just like us, the first apostles were very different people with very different gifts, seeking unity through the oneness we have been given with God in Christ Jesus: going forth and coming back, sometimes changing course, learning and re-learning how to be Christ-centered community in both hard times and glorious ones. From whatever moment in our own lives blessed us with the soul-deep understanding that we are Christ’s own forever, as our baptismal vows say, we too will step out into the world with both our human vulnerability and our spiritual identity in Christ as equal gifts, fed and strengthened by Word and Table to invite others to satisfy their hunger, a people both imperfect and fully beloved called to love a broken world by a Savior whose body broken for us offers the wholeness of new life to be ours ***forever***- both now, here in the lives we share with each other in this earthly existence and in the life to come.

As you know about me by now, I so often turn to hymns to illuminate and deepen my own journey into scripture, and sometimes when they have a particularly powerful connection I share them with you. The words of this hymn from **Wonder, Love, and Praise**, one of our supplemental hymnals, describe beautifully what it means to be Resurrection people in a world that is constantly changing, a world that faces a different set of challenges and invitation in every era but is always a world in need of the Church to live as Christ’s Body and witness to God’s mission in every time and in every place. As one of my seminary professors and dear friends always says- and I love this because it is short and simple enough to remember: “God has a mission and that mission has a Church!”

**\*The church of Christ in every age,**

**beset by change but Spirit led,**

**must claim and test its heritage**

**and keep on rising from the dead.**

**\*Then let the servant church arise!**

**A caring church that longs to be**

**a partner in Christ’s sacrifice**

**and clothed in Christ’s humanity.**

**\*We have no mission but to serve**

**in full obedience to our Lord:**

**to care for all without reserve**

**and spread Christ’s liberating word. *Amen.***