5-15/16-21 You Are Witnesses Rev. Amy Haines

Acts 1:1-11 Ascension/Graduates

Today is the hinge celebration between Easter and Pentecost, between Jesus’ resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit. Today we remember Jesus’ Ascension and his parting words to his disciples as he returned to heaven. Today may we hear Jesus’ words long ago as instructions still given to us today.

--read Acts--

If you have ever struggled to see a loved one leave home or a close friend end a visit, then you can imagine a little of what the disciples felt on that day. When visits are going well, when we see close friends and family members for only a short while, often we do not want to say goodbye, not wanting the visit to end. Many family members have experienced this recently when they can finally hug one another, ending the physical distancing of this past year. Close friends who live at long distances can communicate via phone and email, yet nothing takes the place of spending time face to face, enjoying the companionship.

For the disciples on the day of Jesus’ ascension, they, too, were not ready for Jesus to physically leave them. After the horror of his death and the wonder of his resurrection, Jesus had spent 40 days with his disciples. He did not appear to the religious leaders; he did not show off his power to the political leaders. Jesus spent time with those who had already heard his stories, seen his compassion, and experienced his grace. He spent time at first offering them proof that he was indeed alive and resurrected from the dead. Then he began to remind them all that they had seen and experienced during the past three years. Then he taught them once more about God’s kingdom ways.

After 40 days, it was time for Jesus to enter his glory and return to heaven. While *his* ministry on earth was over, now was the time for *his disciples* to carry his ministry to the ends of the earth. Now was the time for the disciples to “graduate” so to speak, and live what they have learned and seen and experienced.

This weekend we celebrate our graduates, as in less than 2 weeks the seniors of Springboro High School will graduate. Over the past month, many college seniors have already graduated.

Commencement speakers will often offer words of encouragement and challenge, such as when author JK Rowling told Harvard grads:

“The knowledge that you have emerged wiser and stronger from setbacks means that you are, ever after, secure in your ability to survive. You will never truly know yourself, or the strength of your relationships, until both have been tested by adversity. Such knowledge is a true gift, for all that it is painfully won, and it has been worth more than any qualification I ever earned.”

Margaret Spellings, former Secretary of Education, once told Princeton grads:

“Keep learning because you just never know what life has in store for you next.”

While a specific time of learning has ended for our graduates, their education is far from over.

Now is the time to choose how and what and where they will learn. Now is the time to choose who they will learn from. Now is the time to choose what to do with what they’ve learned.

For three years the disciples had journeyed with Jesus and seen firsthand his healing power and miracles. For three years they had been challenged by his teachings of the glorious kingdom of God. They had firsthand experience of his betrayal, suffering, death and mind-boggling resurrection. Then for 40 days following his resurrection the disciples once again soaked up Jesus’ presence in their midst, wishing and praying that those joy-filled days would last forever.

Those days could not last forever. However, Jesus continued to offer words of encouragement and commission. Acts 1:8 is my favorite verse in today’s passage:

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you;

and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria,

and to the ends of the earth.”

Notice that Jesus is not saying they *might* be witnesses; neither is Jesus *begging* them to be witnesses. Rather, Jesus is emphatically stating that these ordinary men and women who were his first disciples, these same ones who deserted him and denied him at his time of trial, they *will* *be* his witnesses through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Even though many of these men and women are from rural Galilee, they *will be* witnesses to Jesus and God’s good news in the city of Jerusalem, in the regions of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

After Jesus spoke these words he was lifted up, out of sight, into the presence of God. Or, as our creeds all proclaim, “He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.”

While the disciples were looking up, in awe of what had just happened, two men in white robes, presumably two of God’s angels, appeared and said,

“Why do you stand there looking up? He has been taken up. He will one day return the same way. Now is the time to stop looking up and start looking out. Now is the time to continue Jesus’ mission and ministry.”

OK, that is Amy’s interpretation of the angels’ words. Yet they are words of call and encouragement not only for the first disciples, but also for all of us today.

Jesus encourages us today to look out, not up. To look at the needs of the world around us rather than just watching the sky for signs of Christ’s return.

Jesus encourages us today to not spend so much of our time worried about getting ourselves to heaven but instead to spend more of our time partnering with God so that heaven can break into our world. How do we help make right? How do we help restore relationships? How do we share God’s goodness with our neighbors?

Jesus encourages us today to be practical. Be my witnesses in the world.

How much easier is it for us to stand looking up, rather than look out and step out into the next chapter of our faith journeys or the next chapter of our lives—college, work, marriage, a new job, a new ministry.

Rev. Barbara Lundblad translated that reluctance into the church:

"Why do you stand looking up into heaven?" Sometimes it's still easier to look for a pure world up there or out there, especially if we think of the church as the body of Christ. We see so many blemishes, so many things wrong. Perhaps you've said, "Show me a church where ministers aren't self-serving, where people aren't hypocritical, where love is genuine, and then I'll become a member." Well, we'll wait a long time, for such a church takes up no space on this earth. Or perhaps such a church lives only in our memories, a time when disciples believed, when faith could move mountains, when motives were pure.

-- “Footprints on the Earth" by The Rev. Barbara K. Lundblad, online

We may want to stand looking up, waiting for Christ’s return, reluctant to go where next Jesus calls us, yet we are called to move, called to be witnesses to Jesus in our homes, our schools, our churches, our communities, our world.

A witness was once described as:

..someone who by explanation and demonstration gives audible and visible evidence of what he has seen and heard without being deterred by the consequences of his action.

--S. Briscoe, Getting Into God, p. 76. Sermonillustrations.com:witnessing

A credible witness testifies to what they have seen and heard. A credible witness does not share the hearsay of others, but tells their own firsthand account of an experience.

As witnesses we are called to proclaim and demonstrate what we have learned and experienced of Jesus and God’s ways. We are called to plant seeds and celebrate fruit.

Yet we cannot share what we do not know. We cannot proclaim what we have not heard or seen or experienced. The foundation for our witness is our faith in Jesus.

Through our faith, we witness to the love and forgiveness and hope of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit. We witness as part of the greater body of Christ, the church, together as Easter people in this world. We witness through proclaiming our stories of Jesus’ presence in our lives. We witness through sharing God’s love in our words and actions. We witness to the ways Jesus has transformed our lives as a way to invite others to be transformed by Jesus.

We witness to God’s restoration of all creation through God’s ways of justice and mercy, of hope and love, of compassion and redemption.

We witness where we find ourselves in relationships with others on a daily basis and we witness where God calls us outside our comfort zones.

Remember the words attributed to St. Teresa of Avila:

Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which the compassion of Christ is to look out on a hurting world. Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good. Yours are the hands with which he is to bless now.

-James Howell “WEEKLY PREACHING: ASCENSION, ALDERSGATE, AND MEMORIAL DAY”

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Tony Campolo once shared a deeply moving moment of witness that happened during Jr. High week at a Christian camp. Even though this was a Christian camp, many of the campers were not Christians, and they treated another one of the campers, a boy with spastic paralysis, with heartless ridicule. When he would ask a question, the boys would deliberately answer in a halting, mimicking way.

One night his cabin group chose him to lead the devotions before the entire camp. It was one more effort on their part to have some “fun” at his expense. Unashamedly the boy stood up, and in his strained, slurred manner – each word coming with enormous effort - he said simply, “Jesus loves me – and I love Jesus!”

That was all he said, but no one laughed – there was absolute silence, broken only by the sound of some of the boys beginning to cry. Something wonderful happened in the hearts of the campers that week, And it was all because of His simple testimony, “Jesus loves me - & I love Jesus!”

--Our Daily Bread, April 1, 1993 on Melvin Newland, sermoncentral.com

As we move forward out of the Easter season, as we move forward still caring for one another in practical ways, as graduates move forward to the next chapter of their journey, may we continue to be witnesses to the glory and love and hope and kingdom ways of Jesus

Be encouraged today by Jesus’ presence, his promises, and his pronouncement for our lives:

Be my witnesses in the world,

through the power of the Holy Spirit

as the people of God.

May it be so. Let us pray.