

Sermon for Sunday 18 May @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Seventh Sunday after Easter/Ascension Sunday

Scriptures: Acts 1:1-11;Psalter: Page 781 (Psalm 47) ; Ephesians 1 :15-23 ; Luke 24 :44-52

“We were there.”

To begin the second half of his story, called “The Acts of the Apostles,” Luke, the beloved physician, repeats the scene from the close of his Gospel, of the apostles watching as the resurrected Jesus was lifted up into heaven where, as the book of psalms says, the Lord has King David “sit at his right hand.”

To commemorate this, a large part of the church has designated a day as Ascension Day, and it often falls, as it did this year, close to the seventh Sunday after Easter. That means that this year we are able to call this seventh Sunday after Easter Ascension Sunday, and use scriptures that celebrate the story of the Ascension.

Not all the Gospels have the ascension story. Mark, the presumed oldest Gospel, does not. When the story is presented, as today in Luke’s Gospel and in the Acts, it is surrounded with Old and New Testament verses that speak of enthronement, as in the psalm, “God has gone up; with a shout!” , and as in Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians: “God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places..”

What we are doing together today is encouraging one another one more way with the Easter story, giving ourselves here ancient and beloved instances of the victory of Jesus and those who accepted his enthronement, like an ancient king in David’s line.

To make this useful, I see us called to ask how, and why, we believe in Jesus and God and the Holy Spirit.

This is awkward. I can remember a week-end in my first year in preacher’s school, called seminary, when I was reading an assignment written by a German theologian, Rudolf Bultmann, who, as far as I could make out, didn’t believe Jesus had died and gone to heaven. He was part of the scholarly tradition that grew up in the scientific age of the nineteenth century and pushed to the limit what we really could scientifically know about Jesus and his long-ago existence. In that afternoon and evening, I was given ... I don’t know any other way to put it ... a trust that was more than scientific, and I just went on with my reading and my course work, sort of like I went on with my belief that my wife loved me, and all sorts of other trusts.

These apostles, these texts, like this room and this internet and this brainwork and all these other things that make up our present ability to trust and go on as believers, are part of the mystery and the power we acknowledge and work with all the time. When we say, “We’ve been there,” we do it with mystery as well as confidence, just as Luke has the apostles report in our story for today.

I found Bultmann's insights useful, but not complete. I found my marriage beautiful, and yet here I am, divorced for nearly thirty years, with both the gift and the loss worked into my character and outlook. When the apostles described their experience with Jesus, and when Luke wrote about it, and when the church has taught about it over the centuries, it has become both an absolute fact and a part of the mystery we call life with God.

I sum it up this way because I'm certain that faith is more than science, and yet science is important to us in ways we couldn't have described to the apostles. New knowledge is forever changing things, and right now we are in a time of testing and experimenting like no other we've known. That is good news ... and it puts us on the spot. My ability to love you ... to treat you right ... and my capacity to love and accept myself, are being created day by day. I'm not finished. You're not finished. Jesus is Lord, and Jesus is also on both sides of this awful situation in Palestine that deserves our prayers Real, heartfelt, sacrificial, argumentative, change-making, with confession we Americans have sent too much support to Israel over the years, just as the Palestinians have kicked at the traces of their situation hurtfully again and again.

This is just one example. This is how we live. Our light mustn't be hidden under a bushel. The world news is our news, just as our cars and food and clothes come from all over like our money and medicine, and our incredible, mystifying capacity to do good, and be brave and kind, and to overcome big mistakes, not just the ones we make, but those made by others that influence us. God is awesome. Help us, Lord! Thank you, and keep walking with us, please.

This is how life is, in Jesus Christ. "We were there...." And "God help us be here where we belong, doing right as we learn it from you.

In Jesus Christ I say it.

Amen.