

## Sermon for Ascension Day Year C

**[RCL] Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53; Psalm 47 or Psalm 93**

It's a tragic thing to witness someone who does not have hope or dreams for the future. Part of our human nature is to envision a better tomorrow and strive for new accomplishments and realities. When this part of our nature dies, the whole person eventually gives up and dies. Many times our deepest desires are birthed in our most primal need for family, love, acceptance, and self-realization. When dreams and hopes are not fulfilled as we envisioned, we may face a crisis of faith as we struggle to make sense of the harsh reality of life. Jesus' disciples lived in a time of repressed hopes and dreams that were squelched by foreign powers and internal competing political and religious factions. Their religious leaders did little to help keep hope alive, but rather burdened the people with endless rules and regulations that were impossible to fulfill.

Israel existed as a vassal state under the control of other nations for much of its long and checkered history. First it was the Assyrians and Babylonians, and then the Persians followed by the Macedonians, and finally the Romans. After centuries of rebellion and armed struggle to gain their freedom, the people of Israel held on tightly to the hope of reestablishing the Davidic line on the throne in Jerusalem. When Jesus appeared on the scene, the disciples were well steeped in this nationalistic dream. Just before Jesus ascended into Heaven the disciples asked, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"

It is apparent that they were still looking at the events that transpired over the previous three years through earthly eyes. They were holding tightly onto the hope that Israel would be delivered from Roman hegemony and Jesus would become their king despite his assertion that his kingdom was not of this world. It is difficult to let go of dreams we've held on to for so long, especially dreams that give us the strength to endure hardships and injustice.

The disciples were members of a subjugated people, living under Roman law, and members of a despised race. It's understandable that they held on tightly to the hope of a better life, one where they could reach their fullest potential and be able to live their lives as a free people. What they failed to see, however, was that Christ promised this very thing, but not in the manner in which they had dreamed. They were not yet able to let go of their national dream and open themselves to receiving the greater blessing that God had in store for them.

They were not able to envision the impact they would have on the Roman Empire and the world at large. Their view of life was still shaped by their limited vision that was focused on statehood and local politics. Little did they know that in just a few decades Rome would completely destroy Jerusalem, their temple, and their way of life. But out of the smoldering embers would rise a Church, one that transcended ethnic and political barriers, one in which Christ predicted that even the Gates of Hell could not prevail.

Like the disciples, we too seek a life where we can achieve our fullest potential and feel as if we have a purpose for living and make a difference, that our existence has some deeper meaning than just getting by until we finally die. For many of us, we have a deep desire to be needed and

wanted by others. We may long to make an impact on those around us and be remembered as someone whose life was not lived in vain. Our view of life is often shaped by our own limited vision we have of life and the circumstances in which we find ourselves. We may define ourselves by what others say or do to us.

Sometimes we live our lives as a subjugated people, ones who are enslaved by our fears, doubts, feelings of inferiority, and our seemingly unmet need to love and be loved. We hold tightly onto things and people that we believe will bring us wholeness and happiness. The tighter we hold, however, the emptier we feel.

Eventually we give in and negotiate a truce with that which makes us miserable, much like the leaders of Israel did with the Romans. Or, we get angry and rebel against what is taking away life's joy and impeding our goals and we find ourselves constantly at war with others and ourselves. This was the plight of the zealots of Jesus' day. Either way, we miss the point of Jesus' purpose, just as the disciples did when he spoke to them prior to his ascension.

Sometimes when we lose the object of our affection we see that which is greater and more meaningful. It's a painful process, but one in which we can gain great insight, blessing, and peace. We are asked to let go of those things we hold dear to our heart and love deeply, as well as those things that hold us captive and slowly extinguish our hopes and dreams, and ascend with Christ to that place where we are glorified with him. Christ's ascension is a reminder of the Kingdom of God within our hearts, and of the ever-present Spirit of God, watching over and protecting us as we spread the light of Jesus' truth throughout the world. Jesus completed His earthly mission of bringing salvation to all people and was physically lifted up from this world into Heaven. The meaning and the fullness of Christ's Resurrection is given in the Ascension. Having completed His mission in this world as the Savior, He returned to the God in heaven and raised earth to heaven with him!

Jesus glorified humanity when He returned to God and reunited us with God. Jesus took on our human nature and then deified this human nature by taking his body to heaven and giving it a place of honor at the right hand of God. With Christ, human nature also ascends and consummates the union of God and human. He took with him all of humanity's weaknesses and frailties – our fear, insecurity, feeling of rejection, hurts, anger, disappointments, despair, doubt, pettiness, resentment, bitterness – and transformed us into his image. Christ's redemptive ministry was not complete until he returned to God in bodily form. By doing so, he made a way for all of humanity to experience God's healing both in spirit and body.

The angel asked the disciples why they were looking into the sky where Jesus had just ascended. We often find ourselves doing the same thing even today. We look heavenward for answers, but the answers we look for are found right here. They are in front of us and in our hearts where God dwells. The answers are found in the people whom God brings into our lives, and they are revealed in the circumstances in which we find ourselves. Christ's redemptive work on the cross was completed when he ascended into Heaven. There he intercedes for us in bodily form as we go about his business here on Earth. We have been redeemed, not only in our spirits but also in the flesh through Christ's ascension.

Paul writes that the suffering of this present time is not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us. Mortal flesh has been glorified in Christ, and along with that our dreams and hopes have also been sanctified. Go and live life to its fullest, don't lose hope, keep on dreaming, live righteously and fight for righteous causes, and love lavishly. Amen.

*Written by The Reverend Deacon Timothy G. Warren*

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