



“Clothed with Power”

Homily by Rev. Patricia Farris

Luke 24:44-53

Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

This is the Sunday on which we celebrate the Ascension of Christ, one of the earliest celebrations of the church, noted since at least the fourth century. Though we may not thoroughly understand what it’s all about, it is at the core of our faith and of our lived experience as the church.

Turn in your hymnal to #882...and let’s recite together the Apostles’ Creed:

There it is: “he ascended into heaven.”

One contemporary preacher has called the Ascension the exclamation point on the Resurrection! As if the early church wanted to shout: “he really, really rose!” Really and truly. How high? As high as the very throne of God.

The Ascension is described, in slightly different versions, in the Gospel according to Luke, the story of the life of Jesus, and also in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, the story of the beginnings of the life of the church.

The story of the Ascension, you see, is told both at the end of the story of Jesus’ life and at the beginning of the story of the church. It is the hinge between the two. It marks the moment when we shift from Jesus’ time into our own, from Jesus’ story to our own story. In order for Jesus to be the Christ, to be both fully human and fully divine, he must be lifted up and seated now and for all time at the right hand of God. And simultaneously, for the church to take authority, for the church to be empowered, it must let him go and take his power into itself.

As Jesus ascends, it becomes clear that the Body of Christ, now on earth, is no longer Jesus, but the church.

One preacher tells a story of trying to explain this to children. And of course, if we can explain it to children, we maybe have half a chance of explaining it to grown-ups! He said he went and bought a helium balloon and took it out into the courtyard of the church. He made a drawing of Jesus on the balloon and with the children all gathered ‘round and watching intently, he let it go. And they all stood there, looking up, watching the balloon until it drifted beyond their sight.

Eventually, he said, all they could see was a blank blue sky. He said: “There was a moment of silence, which went on for awhile. We looked up. Then we looked at each other. I didn’t say a word. I let the silence hang there. After a while, when everyone was getting restless, I said: ‘Maybe that’s how the disciples felt after Jesus left.’ And so there’s only one thing left to do: turn to each other and ask: “what now? what next?” You look around and you realize: we’re it. It’s up to us.

There are times in this life when we find ourselves in very similar situation, it seems to me. Sometimes wondrously joyful, sometimes excruciatingly painful. Things change, and all of a sudden the future looms before us. And afterwards there we are, asking ourselves: what now? What next?

Most of us look back on our lives and marvel at things that have happened or come our way. If we had known in advance what we were going to have to do, have to get through, have to deal with, we’d have said: no way. Not possible, God. I’ll never make it. I can’t possibly do that. An illness, a set-back, a huge challenge, a loss, a big job promotion, an impossible relationship. No way could I get through that, God.

But looking back, we know we can, with the help of God. Looking back, we testify that we’ve been carried by the power of prayer. Looking back, we’re positive that a power much greater than ourselves, far beyond ourselves, far greater than anything we could muster on our own, has brought us through. We have already within us more than we need to get by, to carry on, to get through. We have power from God. And that’s finally all we need.

The story shifts. A new chapter begins. We can't see into the future. We don't know how it will come out. Sometimes all we can do in those moments is to have a cup of coffee and wash the breakfast dishes and put on some clean clothes and go out for a walk and get on with life. Because we've got so much more going for us in those moments. There's an incredible gift available to us if we will just pause and receive it. That gift is a blessing from God in Christ Jesus. A blessing from God for each of us and all of us from our ascending Lord.

Just before being lifted up, Jesus says to them: stay where you are. You will be clothed in power. You will be clothed in power. Jesus blesses his disciples, the church, with power to live, to witness, to have faith. You will be clothed with power, he promises.

You know, church, sometimes I worry that we don't believe that God longs to bless us with power. I don't mean the power of money, or the power of status or the power of privilege. I mean the power of faith, the power of believing. I mean the power of knowing that God has put us here for a purpose and God wants us to succeed. The power of believing that God has a mission for us, that indeed, if God's message is to be manifest in this very world, it's going to be through the likes of us and God will give us the power to do it.

Sometimes we get so caught up in what we don't have, what we don't know, what we can't do. Still, Jesus says: "You will be clothed with power." I am giving you what you need. I am giving you all you need. And I am giving you power to be my disciples in this world, in this church, at this time in this place."

There's an old legend about the return of the Lord Jesus Christ to heaven after his Ascension. It is said that angel Gabriel meets him at the pearly gates and they have the following exchange:

"Lord, this is a great salvation that thou hast wrought," said the angel. But the Lord Jesus only said: "Yes." Gabriel presses him. "What plans hast thou made for carrying on the work? How are all to know what thou hast done?" asked Gabriel.

"I left Peter and James and John and Martha and Mary to tell their friends, their friends to tell their friends, 'til all the world should know."

"But, Lord Jesus," said Gabriel, "suppose Peter is too busy with the nets, or Martha with the housework, or the friends they tell are too occupied, and forget to tell their friends—what then?"

The Lord Jesus did not answer at once; then he said in his quiet wonderful voice: "I have not made any other plans. I am counting on them."

Christ Jesus is counting on us now to keep the faith and pass it on. Christ is counting on us to be his church. Christ is counting on us to live lives of faith and joy and hope. Christ has blessed us. He has clothed us with power. And that power, friends, is the power of God at work within us through our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Notes:

Ascension Day sermons from St. Bart's Episcopal Church, NYC, by the Rev. Bill Tully and the Rev. Jay Sidebotham.

Resources for Preaching and Worship Year C, compiled by Hannah Ward and Jennifer Wild. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003.

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