Commissioned: Show God’s Love - Ascension Sunday

Acts 1:1-11 Kimby Young
Matthew 28:16-20 June 1, 2025

Luke 24:45-53

This is the last Sunday of Easter for this season 2025. The celebration of Easter continues for 7 weeks of 7 days – so 49 days - and on the 50th day we celebrate Pentecost – which will be next Sunday. The point of such a long blessed season of Easter is not just to celebrate – although that is part of the reason for the season. The point is really to live in the resurrection, live in the new life of Christ, live in the season of transformation, and to understand what that good news means to us, and to share it with others. In the Old Testament 50 was the number for jubilee – every 50 years God proclaimed a year of release, a time of freedom for all slaves and the promise of forgiveness with the chance to start all over again. That included forgiveness of debt and burden. The 50 days of Easter remind us that that kind of forgiveness, release, freedom, promise and new life are possible every single day for every single person because of Jesus Christ. Because Jesus Christ has truly set us free. That’s what salvation means – jubilee is possible, forgiveness is possible, freedom is possible, a whole new life of grace is possible because of Jesus Christ. Maybe it takes us fifty days to understand that – or more than fifty days – a lifetime. But God is going to keep telling us and keep showing us and keep loving us, as long as it takes.

To prove that, the scripture is full of resurrection stories – not just Easter morning but over and over again, Jesus appeared to the disciples during those 50 days- encounters that are all different in some way, unique experiences that fit the particular disciples involved. Jesus wanted many witnesses to the resurrection so that those witnesses could go out and tell the story to the world. The last of those resurrection appearances is reported in today’s scripture about the ascension of Jesus – remembered officially 10 days before Pentecost each year which was last Thursday. The story of Jesus’ final appearance to the disciples is told at the end of the gospels of Matthew and Luke and the beginning of the book of Acts with slight variation in each of those accounts. With that final physical appearance, Jesus promised continued presence, but also issued a challenge to the disciples to witness to what they had seen, to witness to their faith, to witness about Jesus Christ, so that others could come to believe. That challenge, or great commission, is still alive and well, and given to us who are disciples and witnesses of faith today.

I notice that frequently in the gospels, when the Risen Jesus appears, the disciples didn’t recognize him. Then came a moment of transformation and suddenly their vision changed and they could see, they could understand, and their whole world was different because of the risen Lord. Think about Mary in the garden not recognizing Jesus. Think about the two disciples on Emmaus road talking and walking for hours before their eyes were opened. Think about the disciples out fishing and not realizing it was Jesus till after the miracle of the great catch. Think about Thomas – “I will not believe it till I see it with my own eyes.” Over and over again, the believing comes before the seeing. Until they believe it as a possibility that Jesus is with them, they can’t see Jesus with them. It is so hard to believe. Sometimes truth is standing right in front of us, and we can’t see it, we can’t believe it. In fact, these days, facts and evidence and truth seem so easy to manipulate. We don’t even agree what truth is, half the time. Look at the world and all our disagreements. People can witness the very same things, and come away with completely different stories. What you believe shapes what you see. How do we understand what we believe about Jesus? Further, as important, how do we help others to understand – and to see Jesus?

It takes a “leap of faith” to believe in God. You have to be willing to believe or you will not see. That’s why so many people in the world today – so many intelligent, rational, logical, wonderful people – have a hard time with faith. That’s why agnosticism is so appealing. You can’t prove God. I can’t see grace or love. I can’t see it, so I won’t believe it. But that doesn’t mean God is not real. God is real. God is with us. God does love us. God is powerful. God has a plan. God offers resurrection, redemption, joy, peace, light, love, hope. God offers that to all of us, to the world. And God wants that grace for us so much, God loves the world so much, that God came in Jesus Christ, in flesh and blood into the world to show us, to reveal to us, exactly what that love is about. I believe it. I believe it so certainly that I am sure the risen Lord stands and among us today. I believe it. So I see evidence of God’s love absolutely everywhere. And I can’t understand how others can’t see it. Oh, I can understand. I can understand the appeal of reason – the power of not seeing. In fact in the world today – we are very good at not seeing. We are almost trained to stay in our tunnel vision and to not see what is happening in the world – to not see people who are different than we are, to not see experiences that are challenging, to not see pain or suffering, to not see racism or injustice, to not see poverty or cruelty, to not see waste and greed, not even to see people trying their best and meaning well if they have different opinions. We train ourselves not to see – in order to protect ourselves. No wonder many people have trouble seeing God.

But if we could just show people the magnificent God we see. If I could just help them feel and know the love that God gives. And not because they’ll “go to hell” without it, but because - it is so great to know God. The power of resurrection and transformation, the mercy of forgiveness and redemption, the good news of grace and love that God offers, is something I wish everyone could experience.

The question is – how can we help others to see and to believe God? How can we be witnesses in this world of unbelief to a reality that we know? How can we witness to God’s love – which is so clear to us – when others are not ready to see it? They are like Mary weeping in the garden, the disciples complaining along Emmaus road, the twelve fishing with no hope of a miracle. They cannot see until the miracle breaks through. But I believe that miracle is just waiting to break through. I believe that gift of grace is available at any moment of any day to anyone. God is ready, waiting and willing to touch hearts and open eyes – to transform lives and to stand beside anyone who is ready to believe.

And perhaps we are part of that miracle. Perhaps you – You are called to offer that transformation to someone. Perhaps you are the one who can offer grace and open another’s eyes to the presence of Christ here and now, to the experience of God’s love. The commission for today, the scripture for today, reminds us to witness to the miracle, to share what we have seen, so that others may believe. So that others may receive. For our PYF Mission Trip going out into the world. You are commissioned. Your job is to share God’s love. For all of us – wherever you find yourself. Show God’s Love. Pretty simple – share it. That’s your responsibility. Share what you believe. It’s up to others to believe it.

I don’t think this is a new problem. Even in the Matthew scripture for today – the one remembered as the Great Commission – verse 17 says “When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.” Look at those 3 last little words – but some doubted. What does it mean? There they are standing on the mountain with the risen Lord, witnessing it all – but some doubted. Scripture doesn’t explain this, it doesn’t amplify it, it doesn’t say …why they didn’t believe, or who didn’t believe. It just says “some doubted.” But they were standing right there! They all received the commission that follows. They all were told to be witnesses, to share what they had seen. And they all were promised – I will be with you; as we are promised – “I will be with you to the end of the age.”

Our challenge could not be more clear – as Acts says – you are God’s witnesses. You are to tell - when and where and how you see God’s love and God’s presence in the world. You are to share what you believe so as to encourage others to believe. And if you don’t feel able, if you don’t feel up to it, if you don’t know how, if you just aren’t sure – don’t worry. You are not alone. God will be with you and a community of believers will surround you. You will be given power as the Holy Spirit breathes into you and into us and offers us every gift we need to carry on this message of God’s love and grace.

But wait, that’s another story and another sermon for another day – next week in fact – Pentecost. So be sure to be here for the rest of the story. For that is when - You will receive power by the breath of God to share the love of God in every possible way we can imagine. Share God’s grace as you have received God’s grace through the abounding grace of Jesus Christ our Risen Savior. Amen.