

## Ascension Sunday – Bob Munshaw

Acts 1:1-11; Psalm 47; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53

As many of you know, as you prepare to preach, you sit with the text ... or at St. Paul's with the texts plural ... at different times and places over the week or weeks as you prepare. Well, it didn't take too long this week to see some key themes that emerge from the texts.

Look at the texts for a minute. If you were going to name two or three theme that immediately emerge, what would you name?

Hmmmm ... are we on the same texts? I only found two! The first theme I found, we'll call Disneyland. The second is Graduation.

I have always loved Disney Land and Disney World. I know, I know ... it's an overpriced, superficial experience that costs an arm and a leg ... but my folks took me to Disney Land when I was about 8 ... a time when the magic kingdom is truly amazing for a kid. It wasn't like the small town fairs that would come to Estevan, Sk, or to Moose-Jaw when I was little. No, Disney was it's own world. We never had a whole lot of money growing up, and so the couple trips we took to Disney in my childhood only included one day passes ... and there is no way that you see and experience everything that there is to see and do in one lonely day

Since that first Disney trip, there has always been something magical to me about being able to escape to another world. As a younger child, I read The Tower of Geburah series of books in which three children escape to a medieval world through these old tv sets that they found stored away in a strange uncle's attic. I read the Lord of the Rings trilogy several times during my teenage years ... escaping to that amazing creation called Middle Earth. Even as an adult, the first of the Pirates of the Caribbean movies captured my imagination ... though I admit that is a little embarrassing.

The readings from both Luke and Acts inform us that the place the Jesus ascended to was heaven. When I was really little ... heaven captured my attention in a similar way to Disney Land. There was something about the streets being paved with gold ... and the pearly gates, which seemed so unique and special. I grew up with the King James version, and so when Jesus told his disciples he would be returning to heaven ... he said "In my Father's house, there are many mansions." Which sounds a lot more impressive then the NIV which says ... "My Father's house has many rooms." Mansions trump rooms any time in my book.

My grandma had a little book ... a wordless book that she gave to generations of children (find one?) Did any of you have one of these little books growing up? Anyways, there was a song that went with the book. – Sing it — "My heart was black with sin, until the Savior came in. His

precious blood I know, has washed me white as snow. And in God's word I'm told, I'll walk the streets of gold. To grow in Jesus each day, I'll read my Bible and pray."

Grandma was all about heaven ... and Christ returning to take His people home to heaven with him. Though Jesus doesn't specifically say that in our passages, there are other's, like John 14, where he more specifically does speak of preparing a place for us. Grandma had a strong pre-millennial dispensational theology. In other words, she talked a lot about Jesus returning to rapture the church. She had one picture in her house ... a bit of a panoramic scene where people were being raptured out of cars, homes, airplanes, etc. It intrigued me as a child ... and probably for all the wrong reasons! She also had another picture. I remember it vividly. The picture was of a little girl playing in a field of flowers. Superimposed on the picture were the words "Maybe today!" It was hard not to think of heaven in that environment.

I have to admit, though, that I don't spend a lot of time thinking about heaven anymore. I don't find myself interested in stories where people have had "near-death" experiences, and have "seen" some version of heaven. Right or wrong, I find my focus on this world.

In fact, I don't know that our faith needs to be maintained by this type of pie in the sky/ heaven is what matters theology. I'm not saying that we shouldn't be aware and even celebrate that we have an eternity with God in whatever form it takes ... I'm just not sure that should be our sole focus. As Jesus prepared to return to heaven, he had a very important conversation with his followers. We'll call it Graduation.

## Graduation

We have an interesting grouping of Scripture passages today, but for the moment, I am going to stay with the readings from Luke and Acts. The Gospel reading comes right at the end of Luke's gospel, while the Acts reading is the very beginning of the book of Acts. What makes this interesting, is that these two books were written by the same author. The Gospel records the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the Christ. The book of Acts continues the story begun in Luke with the birth and earliest days of the church. It's very clear that Acts picks up right where Luke is leaving off.

One helpful way to look at the Ascension ... and I admit freely to stealing this idea from Father Loren Kalinowski, is to think of the Ascension as a graduation of sorts for the disciples.

Greenville College has this new three-year degree program that they are advertising. This is something that I desperately needed back in my day as a student. It took me 6 years to get done. I'm still not sure why. It could be just because so many people liked me as a student. I'm sure that's it. But, anyways, the college has this three-year degree thing, I think because the college want to be more like Jesus. Scholars believe that Jesus worked with his disciples over a three-year period ... and then they graduated.

You might even look at the words of Jesus in Luke and Acts as two parts of a graduation address. In John's Gospel, Jesus has a farewell talk with his disciples that lasts for several chapters. But here in Luke-Acts, the talk is much more concise. He points out to them the way in which he has fulfilled the Scriptures, opening their minds to help them understand. Acts tells us that they had witnessed Jesus alive and doing things that convinced them that he had returned from the dead.

And then he said ... to wait in Jerusalem for three days, and then the Holy Spirit would come and give them their diplomas. Okay ... maybe it doesn't read quite that way. But that is sort of the idea, right?! They had been trained, molded, shaped for the previous three years with Jesus, and now they were being commissioned to go and serve Jesus as His witnesses.

Father Kalinowski, reflecting on Matthew's gospel, notes that as the 11 apostles gathered with Jesus, they worshiped him, but they also doubted. He continues, "In other words, just like today's graduates the apostles have a lot of mixed feelings. Probably excitement, but also sadness. So they say, now what Jesus?"

And in our passages, he is clearly telling them that God would continue to be with them in the person and presence of the Holy Spirit. This is good news for those that are graduating from high-school in a few weeks and heading into college or into other new endeavours. It is good news for our college students who are a few weeks from graduating ... and beginning a new life outside the safe bosom of Greenville College. And, it is good news for all of us. It is a reminder of the purposes that God has given us, and also the very real presence of God in each of our lives.

"The message of the Ascension is that you are my witnesses of my forgiving grace, of my healing mercy, of my peace and of my transforming love. Show these qualities and virtues to others. And then, my graduation message will be seen and heard."

Like the apostles, we too have all kinds of mixed feelings. However, as Christians we are asked to be hope-filled people.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians speaks to this hope, too. He prays that God "would give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power."

Paul grounds his hope in the fact that Christ has not just been raised from the dead, but has been placed at the right hand of God the Father. The ancients would have understood this term to clearly mean a place of authority and honor. The point is that we can have confidence as Christians because we know WHOSE we are. As individuals and as a church, we can trust that as we seek to follow Him ... to serve Him ... to be His witnesses, God will guide our steps.

As I was thinking about the texts for this week, I spent some quality time thinking about things that really impress me ... particularly things with power and authority. What symbol might there be on earth that we could think of that might begin to help us think about the depth and breadth of the power and the authority of the God we serve ... and the God who is at work in our lives. If you were going to use earthly examples of authority, what might you use to try and help us think of God's sovereignty?

Hmmm ... well here are a few of my authority ideas

Well ... referees are authorities, but although they seek to be arbitrary and just, as our highschool soccer girls were reminded of last night, they are sometimes blind and downright wrong ... well that doesn't help us in thinking about the authority of Christ.

Let's see ... hmmm ... well, there is the great symbol of authority in Canada ... the Mountie ... looking regal on their horses, seeking to enforce the law of queen and country ... that's better than a referee, but a Mountie can hardly begin to compare to God's authority. In fact, Mounties serve a higher authority.

There is also the queen ... but as wonderful a symbol as she is, alas, she is now a mere figurehead. That is hardly fitting for the maker of the universe.

Probably the most fitting thing that we can do as we consider who we are, whose we are, and who we are commissioned to serve, is to go back to Scripture ... and specifically to our Psalm. We've already read this Psalm together, so I invite you to just reflect on the greatness and power of God as I read it as the closing words of this homily.

Psalm 47 (read slowly ... reflectively)

47:1 Clap your hands, all you peoples; shout to God with loud songs of joy.

47:2 For the LORD, the Most High, is awesome, a great king over all the earth.

47:3 He subdued peoples under us, and nations under our feet.

47:4 He chose our heritage for us, the pride of Jacob whom he loves. Selah

47:5 God has gone up with a shout, the LORD with the sound of a trumpet.

47:6 Sing praises to God, sing praises; sing praises to our King, sing praises.

47:7 For God is the king of all the earth; sing praises with a psalm.

47:8 God is king over the nations; God sits on his holy throne.

47:9 The princes of the peoples gather as the people of the God of Abraham. For the shields of the earth belong to God; he is highly exalted.

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