

## **Sermon for Zion, May 24 2020 – Ascension Sunday**

**Hymns:** 265 – Hail the Day; 376 - Shine, Jesus, Shine

**Scripture:** Acts 1:1-12; Romans 12:4-13

**Sermon Title:** On Your Mark

### **Acts 1:1-11**

*In my first book I told you, Theophilus, about everything Jesus began to do and teach until the day he was taken up to heaven after giving his chosen apostles further instructions through the Holy Spirit. During the forty days after he suffered and died, he appeared to the apostles from time to time, and he proved to them in many ways that he was actually alive. And he talked to them about the Kingdom of God.*

*Once when he was eating with them, he commanded them, “Do not leave Jerusalem until the Father sends you the gift he promised, as I told you before. John baptized with water, but in just a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”*

*So when the apostles were with Jesus, they kept asking him, “Lord, has the time come for you to free Israel and restore our kingdom?”*

*He replied, “The Father alone has the authority to set those dates and times, and they are not for you to know. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”*

*After saying this, he was taken up into a cloud while they were watching, and they could no longer see him. As they strained to see him rising into heaven, two white-robed men suddenly stood among them. “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why are you standing here staring into heaven? Jesus has been taken from you into heaven, but someday he will return from heaven in the same way you saw him go!”*

*Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, a distance of half a mile.*

### **Romans 12:4-13**

*Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, so it is with Christ’s body. We are many parts of one body, and we all belong to each other.*

*In his grace, God has given us different gifts for doing certain things well. So if God has given you the ability to preach, speak out with as much faith as God has given you. If your gift is serving others, serve them well. If you are a teacher, teach well. If your gift is to encourage others, be encouraging. If it is giving, give generously. If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously. And if you have a gift for showing kindness to others, do it gladly.*

*Don’t just pretend to love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to what is good. Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other. Never be lazy, but work hard and serve the Lord*

*enthusiastically. Rejoice in our confident hope. Be patient in trouble, and keep on praying. When God's people are in need, be ready to help them. Always be eager to practice hospitality.*

The Church Calendar calls the seventh Sunday after Easter, "Ascension Sunday," and that's today, so to celebrate, let me bring you to the least impressive place in all of Israel. Well, in all of Jerusalem, anyway: "The Chapel of the Ascension." It's a strange, hexagonal, domed building, maybe 10 feet from side to side, and twice as high as that. It is situated in the middle of a bleak, walled, dirt-floor courtyard. Go inside, and the theme continues – there's nothing inside the building but bare stone walls, and a rectangular hole in the floor, the size of a sidewalk slab, within which you can see a piece of the bedrock upon which the chapel is built. In the bedrock is a foot-shaped depression of sorts. Sometimes, at the top part of the hole, there are a few candles burning in a box of sand. Maybe, if you're lucky, there will be a plate, with a dollar or two laid inside. That's it.

"That's it?" is what most people say when they visit. "You brought us here for this?" And then I explain that according to tradition, this is the very spot from which Jesus ascended to heaven, and that if you look at that rectangular hole in the floor, many people throughout the centuries believe that it contains the mark of the footprint of Jesus, just before he rose into the clouds. This generally fails to elicit any excitement at all from the gathered pilgrims, who are rightly sceptical. The guidebooks agree; as one says: "*The shrine marking the place where Jesus is believed to have ascended to heaven offers Christians a disappointing experience.*" That's about right.

Mind you, had I been able to bring people there on pilgrimage, say, 1500 years ago, they would have been very impressed indeed. One of the great churches in Jerusalem, the Eleona Basilica, situated right at this site, dominated the skyline, looming over the Holy City from the heights of the Mount of Olives. Pilgrims came by their thousands from around the world, thrilling at the thought of standing where Christ last stood. That enormous church, built to mark the place of the Ascension, was, through war and rebellion, destroyed and rebuilt time and again, growing smaller and less impressive each time, until finally settling upon its current unimpressive shape, too small, too decrepit, too sad, to bother knocking down.

I can't bring you back 1500 years, but I can, thanks to Luke, bring you back almost 2000 years, right to that very place. There was no building there to mark the spot; it was simply the top of a hill, the crest of the Mount of Olives, just across the Kidron Valley from Jerusalem. Jesus was speaking with his disciples, those who were with him from the beginning. They ask Jesus when he is finally going to get around

to putting the Romans to the sword and conquering the oppressors and making Israel a regional superpower once again: *“Lord, has the time come for you to free Israel and restore our kingdom?”* (Even after the Resurrection, the disciples still don’t fully understand what Jesus’ mission was all about – they’re a work in progress, these fellows. As are we). So imagine their surprise with what Jesus says next:

*“The Father alone has the authority to set those dates and times, and they are not for you to know. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”*

I don’t think this is what the disciples had in mind. At all. *“When are you going to do everything to put the world the way it should be, Jesus?”* they’re asking. *“That’s what you’re going to do,”* Jesus responds, *“and the Holy Spirit will give you the power you need to get the job done.”* And no sooner does he say it, when, *“he was taken up into a cloud while they were watching, and they could no longer see him.”*

I’m trying, at a distance of 6000 miles and 2000 years, to read the minds of the disciples as they stand and stare and strain their eyes toward the heavens. All I get from them is confusion. Amazement. Concern. A slight edge of panic. Maybe even a sense of abandonment. *“He’s gone! Where? For how long? Is he coming back? When? Holy Spirit? What? Witnesses? Who, us? Ends of the Earth?”*

There they stand, staring, stunned, when suddenly: *As they strained to see him rising into heaven, two white-robed men suddenly stood among them. “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why are you standing here staring into heaven? Jesus has been taken from you into heaven, but someday he will return from heaven in the same way you saw him go!”*

Or in the Rollwage translation: *“What are you standing around for? Why are you staring into heaven? Yes, Jesus is there, but he’ll come back someday, the same way you saw him go. Enough with the standing around, you’ve got a job to do, so, ‘On your mark, get set, Go!’”*

And, we read, *“Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, a distance of half a mile.”* Well, it’s a start. And that’s the point. It’s a start.

And that’s why I actually like the shabby, humble, disappointing little Chapel of the Ascension. Go to a place like St. Peter’s in Rome, and you get the impression of a faith that has been brought to magnificent completion. Enormous impressive

churches and cathedrals of wood and glass and metal and stone, resplendent in breathtaking artistry, are in a way, a sign of victory, of a challenge over with and won. You go in a church like St. Peter's in Rome, and you say, "*Wow. Job done. We'll just take a seat here and wait for Jesus to return. Nothing I do from here on in will matter.*" Even a place like Zion, with its glorious windows, can give you that impression. "*The struggle is over. Job's done. Welcome back, Jesus.*"

Stand in the dusty, dark Chapel of the Ascension, though, and you get the idea that we'd better get busy, because we've got a long way to go. The task is far from over. The work is far from done. And if you've ever wondered why Jesus ascended to heaven, I think that's why.

Had Jesus remained behind, Christianity would never have grown beyond the immediate circle where Jesus happened to be. Remember, even following three years of intensive ministry, even after the Resurrection, the sum total of the gathered followers of Jesus numbered only about 120. The faith was a very local thing – Galilee, Judea, a couple Samaritan villages, a few followers in Jericho, and a core of Jerusalem hangers-on. For Christianity to spread, it needed to go out from Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, to the ends of the earth. And to do that, the presence of Jesus could not be localised in one individual, but needed to be spread out among many. To be shared with all the world, the Body of Christ could no longer be localised in one man. In God's good plan, the gathered followers of Jesus would themselves become the Body of Christ. In fact, we – you, me – we are now Christ's body. We are the hands and feet of Christ. As Paul put it (1 Cor. 12:27; Romans 12:4-5):

*All of you together are Christ's body, and each of you is a part of it... Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, so it is with Christ's body. We are many parts of one body, and we all belong to each other.*

With the Ascension, we become the Body of Christ. And in the same way that the parts of our bodies each have a job to do, we, as part of the Body of Christ, each have a job to do as well. Paul outlines some of these jobs for us (Romans 12):

*In his grace, God has given us different gifts for doing certain things well. So if God has given you the ability to preach, speak out with as much faith as God has given you. If your gift is serving others, serve them well. If you are a teacher, teach well. If your gift is to encourage others, be encouraging. If it is giving, give generously. If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously. And if you have a gift for showing kindness to others, do it gladly.*

*Don't just pretend to love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to what is good. Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in*

*honoring each other. Never be lazy, but work hard and serve the Lord enthusiastically. Rejoice in our confident hope. Be patient in trouble, and keep on praying. When God's people are in need, be ready to help them. Always be eager to practice hospitality.*

That's only about half of Paul's list, but it gives you the idea. Each of us are a part of the Body of Christ, each of us have a job to do, each of us have a part to play, and if we are to represent Christ, if we are to bring the Gospel of God's Grace to the ends of the earth, then each of us must, in Paul's words, "*never be lazy, but work hard and serve the Lord enthusiastically.*" Or, in the words of the angels at the Ascension:

*"What are you standing around for? Why are you staring into heaven? Enough with the standing around, you've got a job to do, so, 'On your mark, get set, Go!'"*

If the encouragement of Paul and the kick in the pants from the Ascension Angels isn't enough, consider the words of Jesus. He talked a fair bit about going away and returning again, and every time he did so, it was in the context of his followers doing good work while he was away. Matthew devoted two chapters (24 and 25) to this theme; Jesus tells parable after parable along the lines of this eye-opener (Matthew 24:45-51):

*"A faithful, sensible servant is one to whom the master can give the responsibility of managing his other household servants and feeding them. If the master returns and finds that the servant has done a good job, there will be a reward. I tell you the truth, the master will put that servant in charge of all he owns. But what if the servant is evil and thinks, 'My master won't be back for a while,' and he begins beating the other servants, partying, and getting drunk? The master will return unannounced and unexpected, and he will cut the servant to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*

The lesson again (albeit rather forcefully put)? "*Never be lazy, but work hard and serve the Lord enthusiastically.*" Or, "*Enough with the standing around, you've got a job to do, so, 'On your mark, get set, Go!'"*

The ascension is Jesus finishing his work among us, and giving the job to us. Handing us the baton. At the beginning of this sermon, I brought you to the Mount of Olives and the Chapel of the Ascension. Now, let me bring you back to 1996, to the Olympic Stadium in Atlanta, to the Men's 4x100 Relay, to that incredible moment when Bruny Surin handed the baton to Donovan Bailey, and everyone knew it was all

over. The race was won. But Donovan Bailey still had to run! And boy, did he. And that's us. That's us. Jesus is handing us the baton. And it is our turn to get going.

So, it is back from Atlanta, back to the beginning of the sermon, and to the least impressive place in all of Israel, the "Chapel of the Ascension." Let's pretend, by way of a miracle, that I could jam you all inside. I'd point to that vaguely foot-shaped depression in the floor, and I would say to you, "*That footprint doesn't mark the finish line. That footprint marks the starting line. That footprint doesn't mean, 'Stand here.' That footprint means, 'Go!'*"

This beautiful building we call "Zion" isn't a finish line either. It's a starting gate too. For from here, we go out these doors to bring the words and the deeds and the love of Christ to our homes, our neighbourhoods, our city, our world. Our Jerusalem. Our Judea. Our Samaria. And the ends of the earth. Maybe this time of isolation from Zion can be the reminder and impetus each of us needs to stop waiting around, and to minister from where we are, with what we have, to those who are in need of food, of encouragement, of the Good News of God.

Don't just stand there looking into the heavens. *Speak out with faith. Serve others. Teach well. Be encouraging. Give generously. Take responsibility. Show kindness gladly. Really love others. Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to what is good. Take delight in honouring each other. Work hard. Serve the Lord enthusiastically. Rejoice in hope. Be patient in trouble. Keep on praying. Help those in need. Be eager to practice hospitality.*

Brothers and Sisters in Christ: "*Jesus has been taken from you into heaven, but someday he will return from heaven in the same way you saw him go!*" Meantime, you've got a job to do, so, '*On your mark, get set, Go!*' Amen!