



## **Ascension Day 2016: St. James Church, Vancouver**

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

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

### **From the Gospel according to Luke**

Jesus said to his disciples, "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.

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From the Book of Acts: "And two men in white robes said to the disciples: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?"

And from Luke's Gospel: "Jesus said to his disciples: "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."

I am at home one night a number of years ago when the phone rings. It's Ed Miller, a dear, dear friend from my business school years. Ed, a man full of energy, ideas and plans, was one of the brightest students at school. Having grown up with a father who was a prominent community leader in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, and a thoroughly responsible and reliable person, Ed had always idealized his father, mentioning on a number of occasions that his father was just the kind of man that he, himself, aspired to be.

But this time Ed's voice does not have its usual energy and personality.

"Ed, what's wrong?" I ask him.

"I just got word that my father died last night," he says to me.

But then he goes on: "I feel terrible, so surprised, so lost. I loved my father and relied on him to be there for me no matter what. But the oddest thing, Melissa, is that I feel something else too."

He stops for a moment, struggling for the right words, and then in a whisper says:

"I feel, I feel unmuzzled. I feel unmuzzled—as if for the first time in my life I'm about to become who I really am. It's odd, unnerving. I don't know what to do with it. I don't know where to go with it. Part of me wants to run off to Mexico, to change everything. Part of me thinks I just need to wait, stay right where I am and figure out what this means."

I tell this story because to me the story of the Ascension is just like this—a strange and wondrous story all about loss and the sense of dislocation, surprise and promise of empowerment that can come after the experience of loss.

Let me say more:

In our readings for tonight the resurrected Jesus has been with the disciples for forty days, appearing to them, teaching them, walking with them, and eating with them. Now the time has come for Jesus to return to God and so, as the story goes, Jesus disappears from sight into the heavens while the disciples look up into the clouds and watch him go.

It is right at that moment that two men appear in white robes. And it is the question that these two men ask the disciples that gives us perhaps a hint of how the disciples may be feeling. The men ask the disciples: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" as if to chastise them just a bit for their momentary sense of dislocation, their looking longingly in the direction of the person they are losing.

But the focus doesn't stay here long. It moves on quickly to the specific directions Jesus gives his disciples as he goes, directions in which he tells the little band both where they should go and what they should do in the face of his departure.

Jesus says to his disciples: "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." Stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.

To understand what Jesus is telling them, we have to understand something about what the city signifies to the disciples. The city Jesus is referring to is, of course, the Holy City of Jerusalem—that place of longing that dominated the spiritual consciousness of the disciples and of all Jewish people. For it was the place of rich historical significance as well as the place where the temple, the center of Jewish religious life, stood. But it was also a city of

complex, some would say unsolvable, problems. It was a messy, messy place of social isolation, political chaos and economic extremes. Finally, for the disciples it was the city where their friend, rabbi and Lord had arrested, tried and crucified. It was the city of remembered defeat and possible current danger. This, and no other, is the place Jesus where tells them to stay.

And what are they do in the city? Jesus tells them to do nothing but wait to be clothed with what he calls “power from on high,” that is, a power whose source will be beyond them but one which will equip them to do the things that they will be asked to do.

And so the author of Luke and Acts in the story of the Ascension seems to be telling the disciples and us that the loss of the immanent and powerful presence of God (or what we regard as God), though dislocating, is necessary for the coming of a new power that, in turn, will empower us. But it will only come to us when we no longer stand gazing longingly at the past or give in to the impulse to run. It will only come to us when we stay in the messy and complex places of failure and remembered pain, when we stay in the places we might most want to leave behind. In this story, it is in these very places where God will provide us with something greater than ourselves to clothe us for the work we have to do.

And so I wonder: where in your life has something or someone important gone away or left you? In what way might you be gazing longingly in the direction of that something or someone feeling caught in the grip of nostalgia? Or in what way might you be tempted to bolt from everything as a result of your loss?

Likewise here in the parish of St. James, where has this parish lost something or someone that leaves it feeling adrift and looking longingly in the direction of that loss? Where are people here tempted to bolt in the face of this same loss?

What the Feast of Ascension says to us all in these losses, whether these are individual losses or losses we experience as a community of faith, what the Feast of the Ascension says to us whether these are losses of people or losses of ways that we have conceived of our lives, what the Feast of the Ascension says to us is this: stay in the city, stay in the messy places of difficulty and remembered pain, stay in the places of complex challenges and perceived danger: for these very places, these very “cities,” if you will, are the places where, if we wait, we will receive “power from on high,” a power whose source is beyond us, a power that will clothe and enable us to take up the new life that God offers us after the loss.

And so this night, I say to you: Stay in the city. Stay in the city. Stay in *this* city.