

Scripture:

Luke 24:44-53

Acts 1:1-11

“Last words!”

To day is Ascension Sunday.

40 days after Easter Day Jesus ascended and was lifted up ----- returning to right hand of God the Father.

And Ascension is a significant day because it is a kind of hinge or transition point from Easter to Pentecost.

In His last moments with His disciples Jesus speaks of the coming of the Holy Spirit.

And of course the arrival of the Spirit as Jesus promised --- comes next Sunday on Pentecost the 50th day of Easter.

And perhaps you're saying to yourself ---- “Great --- thanks Jonathan --- that was a nice little lesson in the church calendar ---- but what does it mean ----- -- what's so important about Jesus ascending and being whisked away?”

And among other things ---- the answer is ----- it's significant that Jesus ascends because this way His post resurrection appearances didn't just fizzle away --- dying a slow or insignificant death.

Ascension Sunday reminds us that there was a final day when Jesus left the earth definitively and permanently --- at least for now ---- until He returns again at the end of time as we know it.

And because there was a final time when Jesus departed the earth --- it means there were final words.

And so today in our Scripture readings we have Jesus' last words.

He's walked the earth for some 30 some years ----- been killed --- raised again from the grave --- walking the earth for another 40 days ---- and now

today --- just before He leaves for the final time He has a few parting words for His disciples.

But before we get to His last words --- a few more words.

In a way Ascension is a whole lot less about what has happened --- Jesus leaving --- and far more about what is going to happen --- the arrival of the Holy Spirit --- and what the disciples are going to be directed and called to do in Jesus absence ----- to continue on in the work and witness that Jesus first called them to.

The book of Acts puts it this way today ---- picking it up at verse 8.

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you ---- and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem --- and in all Judea and Samaria --- and to the ends of the earth.”

With Jesus leaving ---- the disciples no doubt asked themselves ----- “So what are we to do now?”

“Our fearless leader who has always guided --- and lead --- directed --- and told us what to do --- is leaving us ---- He will no longer be here for us to turn to and ask questions --- so what do we do now?”

To this fearful ---- fragile --- anxious bewildered and anticipating community ----- Jesus promises the arrival of continued Divine Power and influence --- the Holy Spirit.

And instead of fragile --- and anxious --- bewildered and wondering ---- they move to energized ---- courageous ----- imaginative ----- resourceful ----- and in a way that is disproportionate to their size and numbers.

And of course this change of circumstances can only be attributed to God’s great generosity and saving grace.

Remember the disciples ask Jesus in verse 6 from Acts today ---- “Lord are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

And then in verse 10 we are told that they were ---- “looking intently up into the sky as he was going...”

In other words they're a little unsure as to what happens next ----- "So are you going to restore the kingdom now?" ----- they ask Jesus.

But somehow --- despite their uncertainty ----- they are sure enough to affirm their identity and embrace their continued mission and calling.

In the verses immediately following our reading in Acts today ---- they choose a disciple to replace Judas who has died.

Jesus leaves and assures the disciples that they will not be left with lingering feelings of confusion or uncertainty as to what comes next and instead will be blessed with a gift from God ---- the Holy Spirit.

And it's as if Jesus last words are virtually the same as His first words ----- "Come follow me." --- "Do as I have done." ----- "Continue what I have started."

Continue to work and witness in my name ----- continue to work and witness to the kingdom of God just as I did when I walked among you.

Jesus' last words to His disciples are not --- "O.K. now go and do something new in my name."

They are ----- "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you --- and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem --- and in all Judea and Samaria ---- and to the ends of the earth."

In other words --- continue doing exactly what it is that we were doing together.

And instead of me being there to lead you --- you will have the Holy Spirit to lead you.

They are to continue the work and witness --- the establishing of the kingdom of God that He first began in His brief time with them.

Witness in Jerusalem --- Judea and Samaria --- and wherever else it is they traveled ---- all the ends of the earth --- is exactly what they have already been doing with Jesus.

Ascension isn't about any kind of new directive or new direction.

Instead it is all about pointing to a new inspiration and guide and comfort --- -- the Holy Spirit.

A new Divine directive --- that will --- inspire --- guide and comfort --- the very same mission and calling that the disciples have already been engaged in the whole time they have traveled with Jesus.

In this sense very little has changed ----- same mission --- same ministry --- same witness ---- same calling --- only now instead of Jesus it's the Holy Spirit who will be with them.

And so it is for us.

We too --- just like the very first disciples ---- rely on the guidance of God -- - the guidance of Christ --- the guidance of the Holy Spirit until Christ comes again.

Jesus didn't leave a situation by situation ---- detailed to the very minutest of situations guide book of directions ---- in this instance do this --- in that do that.

If your husband or wife upsets you by turning up the volume on the TV instead of always listening intently on your every word ----- then you simply do this --- pull the plug on the set and so on --- things Jesus never said.

Or --- if our family --- continues to do some of those wild and wonderful things that family members sometimes do ---- turn to pages 94-153 for solutions --- life doesn't work this way ----- Jesus didn't leave that kind of guidance.

Sometimes ----- often even ----- we have to work to figure out what exactly Jesus would have us do in a particular situation --- and it's not always easy or obvious.

Sometimes the way Jesus interacts with others gives us clear paths to follow --- and the direction to go is plain and simple --- obvious.

Sometimes through the powerful stories --- the parables ---- that Jesus shares there is clear direction and guidance.

But He certainly doesn't often leave us with a step by step manual on how to do this or that --- the way a manual for our car --- or TV ---- or dishwasher -- ---- or Playstation does.

Sometimes we have to seek the Biblical application in such a way that it requires a little effort and patience ---- calm and discerning.

It requires that we pray --- talk with God ---- and seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the risen one.

There isn't a single predicament in life that isn't addressed somehow in the scriptures --- but sometimes we have to dig a bit and poke around a bit --- talk with God for a while to be lead to the right course of action.

Jesus is leaving His disciples but he's not abandoning them.

He's telling them to hang in --- and carry on in the work and witness that he showed them by example.

Reminding them that they still have Divine counsel at their very fingertips -- -- in the Holy Spirit.

Just as we do.

In order to truly hear the voice of God through the scriptures we must approach them with the realization that sometimes ---- often even perhaps --- depending on how self absorbed and prideful we are --- we won't get the answer we thought we would --- and that sometimes we will have been full of beans and simply put wrong.

So Ascension ---- Jesus leaving ----- Jesus sharing some parting words as He leaves for the very last time before returning again in all His glory.

And His last words are ---- essentially the same as His first ones.

“Come and follow me.”

“Do as I have done.”

“Go about establishing God’s loving ---- saving ways --- His kingdom --- just as I have done --- just as we have done together.”

“O.K. but Jesus” ---- I can well imagine His disciples saying.

“But whenever we were confused --- or down -- or unsure ----- you were there to inspire --- and guide ---- and re-invigorate us ---- what now ---- we’re a little apprehensive to see you go? ----- So are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

It certainly would have been easier on the disciples if Jesus had of restored the Kingdom right then and there wouldn’t it --- they wouldn’t have had to work at restoring it them selves then would they?

But no ---- they have a job --- they have a role too ----- they are to continue on the work that Jesus first began.

The question is without Him around what might they do to ensure that they don’t get discouraged or lose their way.

And the answer comes in the very last 2 verses of our reading from Luke’s gospel today.

“Then they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.”

Just as Jesus’ arrival --- His birth ----- evoked praise and thanksgiving from Mary ----- Zechariah ----- Simeon and Anna --- as well as the angelic choir - ---- and shepherds and wise men ----- so Jesus’ departure sets the community to worship and joyful praise.

When Jesus first steps onto the stage there is worship --- Bethlehem ---- the hillside ----- His presentation at the temple in Jerusalem ----- and now at last --- when He leaves --- there is also worship and praise.

And there is worship precisely because it is always through worship and praise that we are equipped and enabled to do what we are called to do in Christ.

To share Him --- to witness to Him --- to establish the wonderful kingdom of peace love and harmony that God so desires.

The Spirit guides and inspires ----- and we remain in touch and in tune with the Spirit largely ----- through the act of worship and praise.

Last words.

Jesus' last words.

“Yes I’m leaving.”

“But you won’t be abandoned ---- I will send the Holy Spirit to continue to guide and nurture you as you do as I have done ---- witnessing ---- sharing - -- teaching --- healing --- furthering God’s kingdom.”

“And you will be sustained and remain in touch and in tune with God’s will --- as you gather ---- and sing and praise and worship Him together --- week in and week out.”

Notice Jesus’ last words are not --- “Now be sure to develop a mission statement.” ---- or ----- “Be sure to draw up policies and procedures --- set up guidelines and rules and handbooks and so on --- to try to address every possible eventuality.”

We already have the guidelines and rules ---- policies and procedures we already have the handbook of handbooks and then some ----- the Bible.

And we also have the teacher to help us apply it --- and make it come to life in any and every possible situation in life ----- Jesus and the Holy Spirit of God.

Jesus last words in effect are ---- “Continue on my friends in what we have been doing together --- I will be with you --- and God will send His Holy Spirit to be with you as well --- all will be well as long as you continue to listen to God’s saving voice and direction.”

Witness and worship are the themes that Luke shares and highlights in the closing of His first book the gospel ---- and then the opening of His second Book --- the Book of Acts.

Remember Luke's gospel and the Book of Acts were originally one single book --- so our reading today is ---- or at least once was --- one passage.

With this in mind ----- Jesus' last words according to Luke ----- are all about worship and witness.

Worship God --- and witness to God ----- that's what Jesus leaves His disciples with.

And worship and witness belong together like the bud that will not bloom without regular watering.

The church's mission ---- to witness to God's will as most perfectly and completely revealed and lived out in Jesus Christ ---- dries up without the renewal of worship.

The church's mission ---- dries up without the renewal of worship.

And so this is why Jesus last words are all about worship and witness together.

“Then they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.”

And -----

“...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you --- and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem --- and in all Judea and Samaria ---- and to the ends of the earth.”

Are the very heart of the gospel ----- the good News of our Lord Jesus Christ today.

These are indeed His last words.

We live eternally with God --- and our time on earth is truly just a few quick passing moments in a long long eternal life.

So we must spend our brief time here wisely ---- and get on with what we are called to do ----- worship and witness --- witness and worship ---- worship and witness ---- witness and worship ----- worship and witness --- witness and worship ----- and so on endlessly.

That's what we see Jesus doing ---- worshipping and witnessing ----- witnessing and worshipping ----- worshipping and witnessing ---- and so on endlessly --- right up to His very last days.

And so it's no real surprise that His last words --- center around worship and witness.

Ascension Sunday --- Jesus leaving ---- and returning to the exact place He first came from ---- God's right hand.

And Ascension Sunday ---- Jesus speaking of the very same things He has all along ----- worship and witness.

His last words are essentially the same as His first.

“Come --- follow me ----- do as I have done --- worship God and witness to His wonderful --- mysterious ---- awesome ----- saving ways.”

“And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem --- and in all Judea and Samaria ---- and to the ends of the earth.”

For us ---- His last words might read something like ----- “and you will be my witnesses in Whitby --- and in all of Durham Region --- and the rest of Canada ---- and to all the ends of the earth.”

May it be so ---- as we continue to follow the one who has called us on this great and wonderful journey of faith together.

Jesus the Christ --- the King of Kings ---- and Lord of Lords.

The one who's Kingdom shall reign over all the earth.

The one who will finally return in all His glory --- and at just the right time.

The one who will ultimately have the very last of Last Words.

Amen.