**Passing The Torch (Acts 1:1-11) May 29th, 2022**

The story of Ascension Sunday always falls 40 days after Easter. It is the moment when Jesus is “carried up” to heaven, and it was certainly a dramatic event for the disciples. There are various descriptions of the Ascension, but the one in the beginning of Acts tells us that as the disciples were watching:

*Jesus was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight. (and ) while he was going away, as they stood staring toward heaven, suddenly two angels appeared* (Acts 1:9)

Well, you can’t get much more dramatic than that!

Billowing clouds, disappearing bodies, angels appearing …

Yet, despite all its drama, the Ascension story does not play a big role in the United Church. In many parts of Europe, it is considered such a significant event in the Christian calendar, that it is actually a public holiday – wouldn’t that be nice!

But in the United Church, we get excited by the stories of Christmas and Easter, but we do not even mention Ascension in the United Church’s most recent faith statement - the Song of Faith.

So why not?

I remember as a child, listening to the story of Ascension in the Anglican tradition, and thinking that it was a bit like “Beam me up” from the popular show Star Trek.

That Jesus was “Beamed Up” to somewhere up there. …. (Indicate)

And maybe that is the problem.

We don’t like to think of Jesus ‘up there’ on a heavenly throne.

In the United Church we are more comfortable with focusing on Jesus here, among us, laughing with children, struggling with us for justice.

But whether we like it or not, the Ascension is part of our Christian faith story, and it has valuable lessons to teach us.

So, what is it saying to us today?

I believe that one of the important messages of this story, is that it teaches us how Jesus recognized that his disciples ***were ready***.

He recognized that his time of teaching them had come to an end, and that his disciples were now ready to go out on their own.

In the passage that we read today, we hear that Jesus had spent time:

* instructing the apostles (v2)
* he had showed them convincing proof of his resurrection (v3)
* he spoke to them about God’s kingdom (v3)
* he promised them that they will be blessed with the Holy Spirit (v5)
* he calls for them to be *witnesses …to the ends of the earth.* (v 8)
* and then he leaves them (v9)

These are strong verbs of empowerment – instructing, showing, teaching, promising, calling ….

Jesus is empowering his disciples to carry on his mission to bring the Kin-dom of God on earth.

The Ascension story is one that tells us that Jesus believes he has given his disciples all the tools and teaching necessary. Jesus has every confidence that his disciples are now ready to go out and live out the mission that he has given them – to the ends of the earth.

That’s quite the endorsement.

But, what do the disciples do?

Do they get right on that task that Jesus has given them? NO!

Instead of being excited to start the work, they stand there staring into the heaven.

They were probably scared.

Maybe they were in disbelief of what they have seen – that would be understandable!

Perhaps they were wondering, ‘what’s going to happen now’?

Maybe they just didn’t feel ready for the task they had been given?

So, they stand there, just staring into the clouds, until an angel comes and says:

 ‘*Why are you standing here?’* (v11)

The disciples didn’t realize that what they had just experienced wasn’t actually the end, it was instead the beginning of a new chapter.

I think we can be a bit like that.

Sometimes we find ourselves staring into the clouds.

Like the disciples, instead of seeing things as a possible new beginning, we become consumed with the uncertainties of what next.

The pandemic is an example of that.

Churches have changed drastically in the last two years:

* digital ministry has become an essential and exciting way to reach out
* churches are twinning and sharing ministers through the marvels of technology
* lay leadership has grown
* and there is a new focus on ways to build and gather as community – like the concert this afternoon.

But, do we recognize this new way of being church?

Are we ready?

Or, do we stare into the clouds and worry about declining roles in church, about people not returning to Sunday worship, about making budgets balance, even about finding a new minister?

Because if we do, then I imagine that in all this worry, we probably forget the task that Jesus has entrusted to us as his disciples – to go into the world and to be witnesses for God.

And let’s not downplay the difficulty of being a witness.

I know that it can be uncomfortable and scary talking about your faith, and sharing what God means to you. But the good news is - we don’t have to do that on our own.

We don’t have to rely on our own abilities and gifts.

We have been given the greatest gift of all – the Holy Spirit!

In our reading, Jesus gave instructions for his disciples to go to Jerusalem and to wait for what God had promised them. He is referring to gift of the Spirit that is usually celebrated on Pentecost.

Through the Holy Spirit Jesus would not just be **with his** disciples, he would be **in his** disciples.

The Holy Spirit totally changed the ways in which the disciples behaved:

* it empowered them to be witnesses to pass on the torch of the Kin-dom of God;
* it enabled them to fulfill the great commission of speaking to all nations;
* and it turned their grief of Jesus leaving, to the joy of knowing Jesus was still with them.

In the prayer of St Augustine, he writes:

*“You ascended from before our eyes, and we turned back grieving, only to find You in our hearts.”*

We too have been blessed with the Spirit.

The good news is that we don’t have to wait till Pentecost like the first disciples.

We can celebrate the Spirit every day!

The gift of the Spirit is here for us now.

It strengthens us, guides us, empowers us, and gives us the courage to be witnesses for God.

We don’t have Jesus with us in bodily form. But we do have him in Spirit form; all the time, everywhere we go.

We have Jesus the Divine living inside of us.

And with that strength – we can go out and we can make a difference in the world.

We can speak truth to power.

We can call out for justice – like calling out acts of racism for what they are, and realizing that we have inherited white privilege.

We can intentionally reach out with love and acceptance to all people through word and deed.

We can have hearts that forgive even the most hideous of wrongs.

And most importantly, we can share our experience of the Divine within us – so that others may also experience a relationship with God, as we pass on the torch.

Think about that for a moment – what has been your experience of the Spirit moving in your life this week?

How has God touched you?

What have been your moments of Divine Joy, or Divine Strength?

What has been your God moment?

As you reflect on that for a moment, I’m going to ask Marilyn to play for us, ‘Behold, Behold, I Make All Things New’ …

 **(music – Behold, Behold – sharing partners)**

Thank you Marilyne.

When you leave here today, make sure you share your experience of the Divine with at least one other person.

I know that sharing your story may not be easy – maybe you’ll felt a bit uncomfortable. I imagine the disciples felt that way too. They weren’t trained theologians – they were fishermen, farmers, tax collectors.

But, if they had not shared their experience of Jesus with others, then the early church would never have begun.

So today, as we celebrate this story of Ascension, I invite you to think about stop looking up in worry about what might be next, and start intentionally looking out for ways to:

* go share the gospel;
* go pass the torch;
* go tell others what you have seen, what you have heard, and what you know to be true. Amen.