

Joy in the Presence on the Risen Christ

Easter 7A

Text: Acts 1:6–14 & John 17:1–11

June 5, 2011

And You Shall Be My Witnesses

Today, we hear the story of the Ascension
where the disciples are gathered together with Jesus
on a hilltop outside Jerusalem.

The disciples are still trying to make sense out of the resurrection.

They are trying to figure out what it all means
and how it impacts what they do as followers of Jesus.

As if the mystery of the resurrection isn't confounding enough,
they suddenly find themselves caught up in the middle of another mystery
as they watch Jesus ascend into heaven.

In their post Easter daze,
they have hopes for the coming of
the kingdom of God Jesus proclaimed.

But they are not sure what it will look like or when it will happen.

In the midst of their confusion,
Jesus doesn't explain anything or answer any questions.

He simply tells them,

*You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria,
and to the ends of the earth.*

It's what happens next that I find so intriguing.

After the Ascension, the disciples are standing there gazing up into the sky
trying to figure out the deep mystery
they are experiencing,

when two men in white—presumably angels—appear to them and say,

*Men of Galilee, why do you stand here
looking up toward heaven?*

In that question is a formidable challenge
to the disciples of Jesus
and to us who follow him today.

The challenge is to

quit standing there gazing at Christ
and get on with the work of the kingdom.

Quit standing there looking at Jesus.

In other words, get off your duffs
and get on with the work of proclaiming Jesus.

When Jesus says, *And you shall be my witnesses,*

he is making it perfectly clear that
his disciples are called—they are chosen—

to do the work of the kingdom

—not in the future—

but in the *here and now.*

As a part of our Confirmation Ministry at Apostles,
I take the time to sit down with each of the Confirmands
and talk with them about what Confirmation means for them.

I want to make sure they know what they are confirming.
I want them to know they are affirming their baptism
and embracing their *baptismal vocation*.
When we are baptized each of us is *called and commanded* by Jesus
to *go and make disciples*...
That is our *Baptismal Vocation—to go and make disciples*.

What is fun is when I ask them,
How are you going to live out your discipleship?
That's usually followed by a puzzled look or blank stare.

So I'll talk with them about the sevenfold gifts of the Holy Spirit:
*Wisdom, Understanding, Counsel, Might, Knowledge, Fear of the Lord
and Joy in God's presence?*

After going over these gifts of the Spirit,
I ask them, *What gifts has the Spirit given you?*
Then I ask, *How are you going to use those gifts to bless others?*

- Inevitably, the Confirmands will think in terms of the theoretical and the future.
Well, I could...do such and such...
But ol' Pastor Ogre doesn't let them get away with that.
*The question is not **could I**—sure you can be a disciple;
the question is **will I**—will you be intentional in your discipleship.*
- That's when they shift gears and move from the theoretical to the future.
Well, when I get older, I will...
But ol' Pastor Ogre strikes again...
*The call to discipleship, I remind them, is not out there in the future.
The call to discipleship is right here, right now.*
- If they remember nothing else from our conversation, I want it to be that.
*The call to discipleship is not about the future.
It is a call to discipleship right, here right now.
If we put off our discipleship to the future, we'll never answer the call.
Our task as disciples is to answer the call now...**and** in the future.*

Jesus says to the disciples, *And you will be my witnesses...*
If you notice, those words are a part of the logo of Apostles.
They are inscribed below the boat with billowing sail on the sea of life.

These words imply our understanding that we are called to be
a *missional church*—a church that is reaching out into the world—
to share the good news of God's love in Christ.

With the inclusion of these words,
our logo expresses our understanding that each of us
is called to be a *missional Christian*.

What does it mean for us to be *missional Christians*?

We get insight into the answer to that question
when we look at the life of Cicely Saunders.

In the 1940's, Saunders entered Oxford University in England.

She was restless and had little focus.

She had no idea what to do with her life.

But while studying at Oxford,

she came under the influence of a colorful professor of English
who was a gifted writer.

The name of that professor was C. S. Lewis.

His faith made such an impact on Saunders

it led her to become a Christian.

As she began to grow in faith, she became even more restless.

This time it wasn't the restlessness of a life without focus;
it was the restlessness of a life with a new-found focus.

Against the advice of family and friends,

Saunders left Oxford

and began to study nursing.

After five more years of rigorous training,

she was certified as a nurse

and began working in the cancer ward of a London hospital.

Saunders' story doesn't end there.

She quickly began to notice that

most doctors ignored the patients

who were terminally ill.

Once the patients were diagnosed as terminal

the doctors sloughed them off,

and many of them died virtually alone.

Saunders was greatly troubled by the treatment of these patients.

She felt they needed to experience Christian compassion
in a visible, tangible way.

So she approached the hospital administration with an idea.

Rather than isolating the terminally ill in sterile rooms with strangers,
she wanted to surround them with friends and loved ones.

Her radical ideas were quickly rejected, but Saunders was undaunted.

At the age 33, she enrolled in medical school

to try to make a difference in the lives of terminal patients.

When she graduated from med school at the age of 39,

she began implementing

her radical ideas.

It wasn't long before others began to embrace her ideas,

and a movement grew out of her work making it possible for dying patients
to live their final days in a setting of love and support.

Cicely Saunders began this movement in England in the 1950s
out of Christian compassion and a sense of calling
to help terminal patients die with dignity and love.

The movement she began
grew in England and later spread to the United States.
It is now used almost everywhere.

This movement
Cicely Saunders began as an act of discipleship
is known today as *Hospice*.¹

Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking up toward heaven?

That's the question that is put to us
who are the disciples of Jesus today.

Why are we standing here looking at Jesus,
when Jesus is calling us to go back to *Jerusalem*—
to Brandon, to our homes, our schools and our places of work,
to share the gift of his love?

Yes, we come here to worship the risen Christ
and be fed by his Word and Holy Supper,
but our faith journey doesn't end here
just looking at Jesus.

In the great commission Jesus gives to his disciples,
we are commanded to
get up and go into the world
to be and make disciples for Christ.

And you will be my witnesses...

Let's make those words more
than a motto on our logo.

Let them burn in our hearts
stirring a passion within us to go back to *Jerusalem*
to share the good news of God's love
made known to us in the risen and living Christ.



**MISSIONAL
CHRISTIANITY**

¹ Adapted from Glenn E. Ludwig, *Walking To, Walking With*, CSS Publishing Company, Inc. www.sermons.com, downloaded 3-08-11