

Sermon Notes – May 6, 2018
“Ascension”
Brian Walton

Imagine with me for a moment that the Bible is a novel. The story begins when the earth was a “formless void” – the opening drama. Gradually, order is brought to bear on this chaos by an extra-terrestrial force known as God. There are many plots and sub-plots – love and war, political intrigue, espionage, exodus and exile. The high point of the novel is reached about two-thirds of the way through when the central character of Jesus is introduced. His story develops in dramatic fashion and we are drawn in by his charisma. The crescendo of the novel is reached in the midst of crisis and our hero is put to death. But, this is no “noir fiction” – the hero returns to life and the community is ecstatic. If you were the author of this novel, what would you do now? Does the story end? Is there another chapter? How would the book continue?

The only way I can understand this morning’s scripture reading is to think of it as a turning point in a novel. The author, who wrote both the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts, has told the story of Jesus from his birth, through his life and teachings, to his death and resurrection. Although the disciples have experienced the resurrected Jesus, he no longer walks the streets of Jerusalem or teaches in the market place. How does the author conclude this story or make way for the next chapter? We read his literary technique in this morning’s scripture. Jesus is “taken up” into heaven. It is as if his apparition floats up into the sky with the result that Jesus’ physical body is never seen again. Historic Christianity has accepted Jesus’ heavenly departure as a fact and given it a name, “the Ascension of Christ.” (show slide)

One modern Bible commentator writes: “... Jesus ascending is nonsensical ... given what we know about the size of the Universe, ascension gets us into all

sorts of problems such as how far, how high, which galaxy?” This commentator concludes, “As a concept the ascension is almost unworkable in our day.” I agree. (black slide) As a “fact” the ascension seems implausible; yet; as a literary technique, it makes way for a new chapter, an ongoing chapter, in the never-ending story of God and humanity. Jesus’ absence created a powerful crisis causing the early believers to ask, ‘What’s next?’

My mother was of the “leave it to Beaver” era. That is to say, she was a “stay at home Mom” who loved her life. The days of her week were ordered by doing the laundry and cleaning the house. Thursday afternoons she took a bus downtown to shop for the family’s needs and on Saturdays she got groceries. Her world was logical and satisfying and she did it all for love of husband and son. My mother was fifty years old when my father suddenly died. Her partner was gone, along with her source of secure income and the dream that took her into their retirement together. Dad’s absence created a powerful crisis in Mom’s life and caused her to ask, “What’s next?”

It took a while, but the opportunity came for her to be employed in the Education Library of the University of Regina. Her world suddenly opened up: she earned and budgeted her own money, she encountered people who had travelled the globe, who had pursued ideas she had never thought of, who were intentional about seizing and exploring life. She was even given a glimpse into the ‘wild side’ of the late 1960’s. Her younger colleagues smoked marijuana, suntanned naked on the roof of the education building, had sex outside of marriage and spoke about protests, gay lifestyles, and the flaws of traditional institutions. My mother’s world expanded exponentially. The painful absence brought about by my father’s death opened a kind of life my mother never knew was possible. Don’t get me wrong, if Mom would have had a choice she would

have preferred that my father lived; however; in his absence something new began.

This same experience seems to be true for the disciples after Jesus' ascension. In his absence something new began. They were filled with the Holy Spirit, lived a communal existence sharing food and shelter, and constantly encouraged one another with prayer. They felt compelled to tell the story of Jesus to everyone they met. They moved beyond the exclusivity of ancient Judaism and took their message to the world - to Greece and Egypt, to what we now know as Turkey and some think even further into Europe and north Africa. They were impassioned and emboldened and established the earliest of churches. Don't get me wrong, if the disciples would have had the choice to hold on to Jesus they would have done so, but in his absence, something new emerged.

I often wished I would have been ordained in 1957 instead of 1977. In the mid-twentieth century the place of the church in Canadian society was a given. New communities were anxious to build churches as one of their first buildings; Sunday schools flourished and the clergy had a defined and respected role in the community. It was assumed that the modern church would be the foundation for a modern society. St. Martin's flourished in the sixties. Sunday mornings were filled with young families; over 200 children were registered in Sunday school, choirs, church camps, men's and women's groups abounded; people were actually keen to attend presbytery and conference; and the Prairie Christian Training Centre was built in the Qu'Appelle Valley to meet the needs of lay people yearning to learn more about their faith.

It is no longer the 1950's. Much has happened to the church in the last 60 years and it appears that the time is coming for church as we know it to "ascend" into God's memory. Don't get me wrong, if I could hold on to the church

of my childhood I would, but in its absence, I must make way for something new. The good news from this morning's scripture is that after Jesus ascends, his presence is experienced as an indwelling spirit and it was this spirit that inspired courage and sent the apostles out beyond the known world.

The United Church of Canada is embarking on this task of letting go. It is allowing its ninety-year traditions of presbyteries and conferences and so much more to ascend into God's memory at the end of this year. We pray that in the absence of the known we will be spirit led. The era of a church on every corner is ending and the average age of congregation's like ours suggests that the church of the future will be significantly different. Buildings are already being sold. The presence of full-time, paid religious leaders are being replaced with bi-vocational clergy who earn most of their living away from the church exercising their call through part-time or even volunteer service to the church. The good news from this morning's scripture is that God's spirit appears after absence to create anew. Dare we trust that there will be a new spiritual community emerge?

A number of years ago I was the presbytery representative to a little congregation in Eastern Saskatchewan who were searching for a new minister. In the interview with one candidate an elderly saint of the church risked asking a serious, but desperate question: "Do you think God is in our church?" I was surprised by the candidate's candor and also his faith, when he responded: "I don't know if God is in your church but I'm convinced that God is in your community."

I recently read about Fourth Street Presbyterian Church in downtown Chicago whose time of transition began in the ferment of 1960's. As the Vietnam war raged and the Civil Rights movement gained prominence many established churches became symbols of complacency. Fourth Street Presbyterian was targeted by vandals and church members left for the suburbs. Many churches

locked their doors or simply closed altogether. At this critical juncture Fourth Street church chose to open its doors and invite in its neighbors. It established a Social Service Center, a Tutoring program, a Counseling Center, a day program for older adults, and a pre-school. Their current pastor John Buchanan writes: “The doors remain open every day from seven in the morning till nine at night — our church is not only in the world, the world is in our church every day; when the spirit of Jesus is unleashed it cannot be defined.”

Already the world is in St. Martin’s – community widows; Japanese drummers; recovering alcoholics and drug addicts; pee wee soccer; environmentalists pursuing solar energy and the list goes on. It appears to me that the Spirit is trying to nudge us forward. The challenge is how to remove the line between renters and landlords so that the world and the “Jesus people” might intermingle.

This morning and next week we are recognizing the latest expression of “Jesus people.” They are a glimpse into the future of the Christian community. Few in number, multi-cultural, people not afraid to stand out from their peers and declare a relationship with Jesus. Who knows where they might lead us – but we can be assured that as one expression of spirit ascends another will emerge for God is at work in the world. Thanks be to God.