

Ascension Day Sermon by Hugh Montgomerie

Bible Passage: Luke 24:44-53

Jesus said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what was written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." Then he had led them out of the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.

Sermon

Ascension Day, one of the red-letter days in our church calendar, was last Thursday. This is what I would have said. It was Julian of Norwich who wrote those inspired words that 'all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.'

They are the words that are particularly poignant this morning because they sum up the transformation in the followers of Jesus that we celebrate on Ascension Day, for on that day we celebrate Christ's leaving his disciples.

But leaving them is not a somber occasion. It is full of joy and hope and reminds us how their lives had changed, of how they had come to trust in God's ultimate purpose for them and believe that all will indeed be well because Christ will always be with them.

This is a great day that marks the beginning of the final days of Easter. Next Sunday is of course Pentecost when the fire of the Spirit is breathed into the hearts and minds of the disciples. But that's leaping ahead. Let us celebrate, this morning, together the journey his disciples had made thus far and what a journey it had been.

From Thomas reaching into the wounds of Christ, to the fishermen by the Lake unable to haul their catch of fish, from his appearance on the road to Emmaus to the great commission to his disciples 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.'

By the Ascension they had come to understand that the Resurrection was not just a physical reality, as indeed it was, the tomb was empty but an ongoing spiritual experience as well.

In other words, when Jesus was physically alive and walking the earth his ministry was limited in the same way our lives are limited. We can only be in one place at a time. Yet, after the Resurrection, Ascension And Pentecost, Jesus' ministry was limitless. Yet quite understandably it took the disciples a while to understand this.

What a mix of emotions the followers of Jesus must have felt. Yet Jesus wasn't content simply to comfort them with his presence. He challenged them, he opened their minds to the new thing he was doing.

Think back to the Gospel reading on Easter Day. Mary Magdalene speaks to the risen Lord and almost his first words to her are 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to my Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father, to my God and your God."'

These must have been harsh words for her to hear. Most of us know how traumatic it can feel when you think you have lost someone.

Think for example when someone you care about says that they will be back at a certain time and they're not. You cannot help but worry and our minds run through all kinds of scenarios, some not pleasant. So that when you see your loved one again we long to touch them, give them a hug, to hold them.

So imagine Mary's sense of elation when she sees Jesus, yet he says to her 'Do not hold onto me.'

The day of the resurrection was not an end but just a beginning, yet a beginning not defined by fear but filled with hope and joy, a hope and joy that spilled over into proclamation.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus leaves his disciples. They will never see him again. But listen again to a few words from the end of the reading: 'while he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.'

They returned to Jerusalem with great joy. These were no longer men and women held prisoner by their fear. The transformation that Jesus wanted in their hearts and minds so that now they were willing to become fodder for the lions, martyrs for the faith.

They had an unshakeable conviction in God's sovereign power over all the earth. They knew that whatever fate befell them as individuals, ultimately all would always be well.

So, let us rejoice that on Ascension Day, we remember the transforming journey that the disciples had undertaken in the days after the resurrection. We too are here this morning because we too are caught up in the resurrection life, we believe that despite all the trials and tribulations of this life, that all will be well, that Christ does sit at the right hand of God, guiding his Church and us his people, leading us through his spirit as he promises into 'all truth.'

Then, let us commit ourselves this morning to live as people not limited by their fears but a people transformed by our Christ who is risen, ascended and glorified.

A Christ who is risen, ascended and glorified. Amen.

Summary

Really only one point: The day of resurrection was not an end but just a beginning, yet a beginning not defined by fear but filled with hope and joy, a hope and joy that spilled over into proclamation.

Questions

1. Have you made such a commitment?
2. Do you want to?
3. Do you need any help?