

**BISHOP'S SERMON FOR ASSEMBLY SUNDAY**  
**JUNE 5, 2011**

TEXTS ARE THE LESSONS FOR THE SUNDAY BETWEEN ASCENSION AND PENTECOST

I give thanks for your faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, for your partnership in the gospel, for your being witnesses to the working of God in Word and Sacrament and in wondrous ways far more than we could ask or imagine.

Today might just be one of my **two** favorite times of the church year. The first, no doubt, is Easter Saturday, that time between Good Friday and Easter Morning! Then there is this Sunday, the Sunday between the Ascension and Pentecost, a great Sunday for us all!

The lesson from Acts about the Ascension is one of my favorite scriptures along with the Hebrews crying out in Egypt, and the Capernaum official on the road back to Capernaum.

I love this Sunday of the Church year, seemingly between the going away of Jesus and the yet to come Holy Spirit!!

The disciples are out on the Mount of Olives with the Risen Lord who has been with them for forty days in all kinds of ways! Talk about euphoria, excitement, a thrilling time of being stoked with the obvious Lord of Life who has overcome death, been raised to life! The Lamb who was slain has begun his reign!!!

So they ask Jesus on this 40<sup>th</sup> day, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" But you have to hear all the meanings of this Greek verb. "Lord is this the time when you re-establish, when you finally cure and heal the kingdom of Israel?" After defeating death itself, are you ready now to clean up the temple, kick out the Roman occupation, bring back the scattered people of Israel, and make David's empire look puny in comparison to the kingdom you will now create?

Jesus says to them, "You shall receive power coming upon you of the Holy Spirit. And you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria and to the last, the least, the most insignificant, lowest place of the earth."

And then, Jesus suddenly leaves them!

"And while they were looking up toward heaven, behold! Two men in white robes stood by them."

"Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up into the heavens? This Jesus received, welcomed into heaven will come again in the same way from heaven."

So here they stand, looking up, between Jesus gone and the Holy Spirit yet to come.

Very similar to Easter Saturday, between Jesus crucified, and Easter yet to come.

Now these are the kinds of Sundays that the Virginia Synod meets on cause we wouldn't dare meet on Easter or Pentecost, the high days, the high moments, the sure days of power and joy! No, we obviously meet with Jesus gone and the Holy Spirit no where in sight!!

And isn't that a most glorious thing, that here we sit this morning, eyes looking to heaven, Jesus gone, and the Holy Spirit nowhere in sight!

Because this is how the book of Exodus begins, the complete absence of God for the Hebrews in bondage in Egypt, making bricks and crying out to an absent God. Yet in the midst of their cries to heaven, unaware to them, God is already down on Mt Horeb as burning bush calling Moses and Aaron to make a new beginning. The bricks and the mud and the bondage....it's preparing their hearts for a long journey through a wilderness time yet to come. They are going to need the strong desire to leave all behind them.

The Capernaum official in the fourth chapter of John has walked 20 miles in enemy territory just to ask Jesus to come down to save his dying son, his little boy. And the Capernaum official has encountered the opposite Jesus he hoped to meet. The official said, "Lord, come down with me to save my little boy." Jesus said to him. "You people just want signs and wonders." The Official said, "Lord, my child is dying." Jesus said, "Go, your son lives." Amazingly at this horrifying moment 20 miles from his dying child when Jesus won't come down with him, the official believes the promising Word and begins his walk between Jesus in his rearview mirror and only an open road of dust and the hot sun before him with distant home yet to come.

God takes Egyptian oppression and raises up Hebrew liberation. The word of Jesus that speaks to the distraught father in Cana at the very same moment is speaking life to his child in Capernaum 20 miles away!!

While the forces of death and evil, joined in with our self-interested sin seem to have a field day in our world. While the brokenness of nature, joined in with our polluted views of having dominion over it, seems to now be in chaos by all that we hear and even experience, even on Easter Saturday

there is in the midst of it a living dynamic Word of God that still creates light from chaos, there is a Word that speaks resurrection to a crucifixion, there is a Word that will not return until it accomplishes all for which God intends, and there is to be a final Word spoken over it all.

While the daily schedules of our lives just don't have a single gap in the busy day to hear it, there is yet a divine Word that addresses us from beyond us, speaking to our world, calling us out, beckoning us to hear and know whose we are and in whose world we live.

God's Word of promise that was poured over our heads at our baptism is right now declaring to your listening ears that Jesus, who was crucified for sin, is not dead but alive! **And** that you now belong to him and nothing shall separate you from His life and love. And you now live between that candle that stood over your baptismal font and that candle that will stand over your casket and nothing will separate you from that promise that you believe! For even as your heart clings to this promise of your baptism, the right hand of God yet holds you fast.

The Wednesday after Easter's high, joyous day, I was in Birmingham, Alabama as four tornadoes came through its area in one day. One of them had a funnel a mile and a half in diameter. These four joined 30 others in Alabama and the ones in Virginia like at Glade Spring, like the ones that have hit Pulaski, Gloucester, Rockingham County, Charlottesville this spring. On local TV, we saw the damage and the survivors standing there, seemingly between the deaths of loved ones and the services of resurrection, seemingly with Jesus gone and the Holy Spirit yet to show up. Yet the interviews in Alabama spoke to people in their darkest hour clinging to the Word, and I heard rescue people in Alabama speaking to being the right hand of God in their work. The mayors all said the same, "We have experienced a great blow, but we will rebuild, we will come back stronger." But here they were feeling like they were between Good Friday's disaster and Easter's dawn.

Then Jesus said to his disciples in this in between time, "**You** shall be my witnesses, to the last place, the least place, the most insignificant place, the lowest place on this earth." Even to people who have gone to the lowest place in their home, even their basement.

This coming week across our commonwealth, full names will be called, tassles will be moved across, graduates will cross the stage from student to graduate. I watched Roanoke College's graduation. On one side stood the student and on the other side they each left holding a degree. But there was this walk of twenty yards separating them. This powerful time between a chapter closed and a new chapter beginning, but there was this in between stretch. And there on the stage stood four people, one naming them and the other three grasping the hands of each young adult in this gauntlet from student to graduate. They gave words of congratulations, but they stood as witnesses present, meeting them, extending out to them, testifying to this word of graduation spoken about their special walk in between student and graduate.

Ohhh, I love this Sunday between Ascension and Pentecost. I love the Saturday between Good Friday and Easter. This is where I seem to live a great deal of my life, seemingly between a disaster and a rebuilt town, between a setback and a restoration, between a broken heart and a joyous heart, between a disappointment and a celebration, between a loss of faith and a vibrant faith, between a death and a resurrection, between a discipling student and a witness with a high degree of certainty enduring the difficult days of the loss, the earthiness, the reality, the pain, the uncertainty, the weakness, the loss of momentum, the return to dust. A chapter closed and a tough interim time before the new chapter begins.

But here is where God broods over chaotic waters of darkness, and says, “Let there be light!” Here is where God listens to those in bondage and oppression and says, “I have heard the cries of my people.” Here is where God says to a distraught official twenty miles out and miles of dust to go, “Go, your son lives.” Here is where God says, “Lo, I am with you to the very last day.” Here is where God in a garden of Gethsemane but a few minutes before his coming passion for our passion says, “I will not leave you as orphans.” And then some time later comes the dawn.

And here is where even angels say to the church, “why do you stand looking up to heaven?” Look to the needs of your neighbors and to what God is calling you to be as His Ambassadors in your places of vocation, family, and community.

Isn't this, then, the right time to meet as synod. To be witnesses to one another. Isn't it essential to grasp the hands of one another, bringing a word of faith to one another, testifying to Christ as the center of our life in a time between Jesus ascended and Pentecost yet to come? Isn't this a time of great expectations in the midst of a more difficult time and a more difficult walk together while God broods and breathes resurrection from death. Yet we are here for one another, “You shall be my witnesses to the last, the least, the lowest.”

That is worth talking about in each of our congregations In each of our homes, our neighborhoods, our commonwealth. Our being witnesses to the last, the least, and the lowest who seem in their life circumstances to be stuck in the Saturday between Good Friday and Easter. Seemingly between Christ ascended and the Spirit yet to come. But we know that we have a word of joyous hope to offer about a crucified AND risen Lord! About a returning Lord AND a Holy Spirit gathering, calling, enlightening, inspiring us!

We know that we walk by faith like that Capernaum official, keeping his feet on the only path he knows bringing him home, his soul clinging to the promise and his being held fast in the right hand of God.

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