

May 21, 2023
The Ascension of Our Lord (observed)
Year A
Luke 24:44-53
Acts 1:1-11
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Surprises

Have I ever told you about the first time I preached on Ascension Day? I keep a digital and a paper archive of the sermons that I preach and I couldn't find any past sermons with this story in it, so I don't think that I have. But if I have, I hope you enjoyed it, because that's the story that I'm about to tell.

As you hopefully know, we are a congregation of the ELCA, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The ELCA is divided up into 64 geographical synods and 1 non-geographical synod. Emmanuel is a part of the New England Synod.

Each synod is divided up into conferences, so that congregations that are physically close to each other can relate to each other. We are part of the Boston Metro Conference and I was the Dean over the Boston Metro Conference for six and a half years before my second term ended last June. When I first got to my church in Connecticut, the congregation that I was serving was part of the Southern Connecticut Conference.

Conferences might do a lot of things together, but one of the most basic things that conferences do is have monthly meetings of pastors and deacons. Those meetings are intended to be opportunities for mutual support and fellowship, for worship and prayer for each other and our ministry sites, and for discussion of different ministry needs and ministry ideas that might be specific to our territory. The Conference meetings also serve as a communication tool from the office of the bishop to the pastors, deacons, and congregations of the synod.

One day, one of those Conference meetings was being held at my church, and the question came up, “What are people doing for Ascension Day?”

This was my second year at Prince of Peace, my second Ascension Day and I was happy to report that we were going to be having a worship service on Ascension Day evening. To be honest, it would be the first Ascension Day that I would ever attend, let alone preach at.

Others shared what they were doing and the other pastors said that he was going to be preaching at an Ascension Eve service on Wednesday evening which meant that he was going to miss a home study from the adoption agency through which he and his wife were hoping to adopt a baby.

I was concerned. I didn’t know the other pastor well, but I could tell that he was sad and upset about missing the home study. I would have been too, as I’m pretty sure that him not being there for such an important meeting might lessen their chances of being able to adopt a baby.

Like I said, I was still newish to the conference and I didn’t know the other pastor well, but as the meeting broke up, I walked up to him and offered to preach and lead worship for him on Ascension Eve, so that he could go to the meeting. His face lit up, he thanked me profusely, and he wrote down the information for the service, where and when it would be.

I still have the sermon that I preached that evening. On every sermon that I write I put information like the date, the liturgical day, the lectionary year, the scripture readings I was preaching on, and where was when I preached it. So, for the location where I was when I preached the sermon it says, “St. Mark’s Lutheran Church, Bridgeport, CT, Southern Connecticut Conference Ascension Eve Service.” My location information on that sermon is incorrect.

I feel like Ascension Day is full of surprises. I mean, imagine being one of the disciples on Ascension Day. You’ve definitely heard me say before that I doubt that Ascension Day was one of their best days, one of their happiest days. In fact, the

evangelist, Luke, kind of captures the mixed emotions of Ascension Day by telling us the story of Ascension Day twice, once in the gospel of Luke and once in the book of Acts. He tells the story differently both times he tells it.

In the gospel of Luke, he has the disciples put a brave face on. After Jesus' final message to them, about scripture being fulfilled and the promise of power from on high, after Jesus blesses them, after he ascends into heaven, Luke says that the disciples worshiped and were filled with great joy and spent their time in the temple, blessing God.

But, in the book of Acts, the same author, who was continuing the story that he started in the gospel of Luke, tells the story a little differently. Jesus orders the disciples to stay in Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. Then he tells the disciples that baptism with the Holy Spirit is coming to them in the very near future. After that they ask him a question. They say, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6)

That's what they were expecting. That's what they were hoping for. The restoration of an earthly kingdom, the end of the Roman occupation, the beginning of a restored kingdom, with the Messiah, the heir of David, who they believed Jesus to be, on the throne. But, surprise, that's not what Jesus was bringing. That's not what Jesus was promising. He did not promise them a worldly takeover. Instead, and again, he promised them the gift of the Holy Spirit and with that gift, power. He gave them new work to do, to witness to him, to his life, to his ministry, to his love, in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

And then, as they were watching, Jesus was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

If the book of Acts followed the story of the gospel of Luke, then the next thing that would have happened was worshiping and rejoicing. But in the book of Acts, instead of doing either of those things the disciples just stood there, looking up at the sky, gazing up into heaven for enough time that they got the attention of

a couple of angels, who came to them and asked them, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” (Acts 1:11) The angels promised that Jesus would return in a miraculous way, and apparently that got the disciples moving back to Jerusalem, while they tried to get themselves organized, so that they could do what Jesus had told them to do, wait and witness.

But Luke’s two retellings of Ascension Day, tell us that Ascension Day is tricky, full of surprises, and it’s hard to know how to react. With joy and trust and hope that God is acting, making promises, doing miracles? With confusion and worry, where did Jesus go? With faith or doubt, with questions or hope, with trust or panic? Who were they, now that Jesus was, to their eyes, gone. “On the other hand,” they might have said to each other, “did you see him rise up into heaven like that. That’s pretty amazing. The story probably isn’t over.”

Ascension Day, for the disciples, was, indeed, a day full of surprises. A day of hope and questions, a day of worry and worship, a day of mystery and trust. Luke tells us about it all. A day when they had to confront that they might not get what they had hoped for, and a day when they had to take in the fact that they might get more.

Now, join me again in the more recent past. How many of you thought when I said that I got the location part of my sermon details wrong that I had turned up at the wrong church? I’m happy to say that that’s not what happened. What happened, though, was that the event was not what I thought it was.

That Wednesday, that Ascension Day Eve, Britton and I bundled nine-month-old Abigail into our car and drove close to an hour away to St. Mark’s in Bridgeport. That was the only thing that I had right about the location of the Ascension Day service that I was preaching for.

I thought that it was going to be a joint worship service for the congregations Southern Connecticut Conference. But it wasn't. It was a local community ecumenical Ascension Eve service. Going into this preaching experience I thought that I might run into some other pastors that I knew from the other churches in the conference. But that's not where I was, that's not who was there, that's not what this worship service was. It was more of a neighborhood service, and it wasn't my neighborhood. And I was struck by the fact that I didn't belong there. But there I was, surprised, confused, mouth agape, wondering if I had done the right thing inserting myself into this worship service that wasn't my community at all, to attend and preach at my first ever Ascension service.

But of course, I didn't turn around and leave. I introduced myself around, assisted by the ice-breaker of a very cute and friendly, church comfortable baby, with the help of a thoughtful minister of music, I figured out what the service would look like, since it was not going to be a familiar Lutheran liturgy, and I got myself ready to preach to a room full of strangers. Then I lived out one of the commands of Ascension Day. "You will be my witnesses, in Jerusalem," which means where you are, and "in Judea," which means where you're from, and "in Samaria," which means where you've been taught never to go, "and to the ends of the earth," which means, of course, everywhere. (Acts 1:8b)

I guess Bridgeport didn't count as where I was from or where I was taught never to go. But it certainly counts as part of everywhere.

You know what strangers find out when they worship together? They find out that they're not strangers. They find out that Jesus' promises are true and that Jesus is with them. That's what I found out, as I preached both the hope and the questions of Ascension Day. That Jesus is with us, wherever we go, by the power of the Holy Spirit. I had a great time that evening, once I broke through the initial awkwardness of feeling like I didn't belong, meeting Jesus in new people, new faces, new community.

And in other good news of the day, the pastor that I filled in for and his wife, were approved to adopt and shortly after that Ascension Day became parents of a beautiful baby girl. A gift from God, who is now graduating from high school! This Ascension story has a happy ending, and by the grace and love of God, who has not left us orphaned, who has not left us comfortless, who will never leave us at all, all Ascension stories have a happy ending. For Jesus is not and never was gone. Jesus is Emmanuel, and in him, always and forever, God is with us. Thanks be to God. Amen.