

“Marching Orders”

Luke 24: 44-53; Acts 1: 1-14

Today is Ascension Day, the day when the resurrected Jesus Christ left the earth. His time on earth was up. That time, both alive and resurrected from the dead, was finished.

We mention this every week, when we affirm our faith with the Apostles Creed: “He ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.”

Both the Scripture lessons, from Luke and from Acts, tell about this Ascension, and both of those books of the Bible were written by Luke. So, apparently, this was a very important thing that happened, Jesus rising into heaven.

One of my books calls this, “The Happy Ending.” (The Book of Acts, by William Barclay.) Well, it was the end of Jesus’ time on earth, both as a regular human being, and as the one who rose from the dead. It was that kind of ending.

Yet, it was also a beginning of something. No, it was also the beginning of more than one thing.

It was Jesus’ return to heaven, a new beginning there. He got to go back to where he had come from—a place of perfection and love and grace. He got to be in fellowship with God and with the Holy Spirit, directly, instead of only long-distance, you might say.

And of course, if anyone deserved to be in heaven, it was Jesus. Not only was he God’s own Son, he had been through a lot during his human lifetime on earth, and especially the cruel death from the crucifixion.

This was also a beginning, or maybe a prelude to it, for Jesus’ disciples. They were to wait, where they were, until “clothed with power from on high.”

When that had happened, Jesus’ disciples were to carry out their assigned project: Repentance and forgiveness of sin is to be proclaimed in his name [in the name of Jesus, the Messiah] to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.” (The Message version of the Bible) These were the marching orders Jesus gave to his disciples.

Let's take a look at those two ideas, the repentance and forgiveness of sins. Unfortunately, those ideas don't get much play these days. Along with a lot of preachers, I am at fault in that.

But sin exists. It is definitely with us. In 1973, Karl Menninger had a book called Whatever Became of Sin?. And, back in the early 90's, I almost got in trouble with the senior pastor when that word, "sin", came up in my sermon. And as I recall it, that word was in the Bible verse for the day!

One thing, I suppose, is that sin sounds like something huge and wicked and dreadful. To quote Tom Berlin, in the Bible study we were beginning in March,

"Here's my personal favorite: "I may have done that, but why is everyone so upset? It's not like I'm an ax murderer!"

[He, Tom Berlin, wants] to say, "Congratulations, you're not an ax murderer! Well done, sir. I have a certificate of appreciation somewhere. Now, about your drinking problem . . ." (Restored: Finding Redemption in our Mess by Tom Berlin)

Big or little, sin gets in the way. It gets in the way of our relationships with God and with other people, and even with ourselves. Sin does harm, all sorts of harm, which we might not even imagine.

Yet, Jesus offered and offers the solution—repentance and forgiveness of sin.

If we will repent of that sin, admit it to God and be contrite about it, and turn that sin out of our lives, God will forgive us.

Sure, it's a process. But it is a process that ends up with God's forgiveness. And God's forgiveness is complete and wonderful. With God's forgiveness, the sin or sins are wiped out and gone. We can move on, and get closer to God and to others. Our lives do get better, inside and out.

There may still be repercussions in this world, or from other folks, but God's forgiveness is ours. We just have to accept it.

It even enables us to do better in the future, and not just keep repeating the same old wrong thing.

Well, if the disciples were in the waiting game stage of things, what was it they were waiting for, again? What had Jesus said?

Oh, yes, it was “power from on high.” They would be “clothed with power from on high.”

The entertainment folks have borrowed this idea a lot! Say, Superman’s suit and cape. Put them on, and he could fly. Or remember the movie “The Mask”? Why, it turned that guy “into a supernatural playboy exuding charm and confidence.” (Computer) And those are just two Hollywood examples of wearing something that gives special power.

What Jesus meant was power from heaven, specifically, the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus would send them, for a special baptism. After all, “the risen Jesus has the power to send the [Holy] Spirit.” (The Tyndale Commentary on the Gospel According to St. of Luke, by Leon Morris.)

Baptized with the Holy Spirit is also put this way: “Yes, John dipped people in water, [Jesus] said, but in just a few days you all will be dipped in the Holy Spirit.” (Cotton Patch Happenings, by Clarence Jordan.)

Isn’t that a wonderful idea, dipped in the Holy Spirit? Well, that did happen, and that is the Bible lesson for next week.

Anyway, the power of the Holy Spirit “would make them [the disciples] world-wide witnesses.” (Storyteller’s Companion to the Bible, Acts) They would be witnesses to proclaim this message from Jesus, “to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.”

By golly, **that is what they did**. Just think, here we are in America, in the state of Missouri. The disciples had never even heard of such a place! Even so, the word of Jesus Christ got here. Christianity got here.

We, the Christian people of now, and all the Christian people ever, have been clothed from on high with the Holy Spirit. We have been dipped into the Holy Spirit. However you want to put it, we have received these gifts in baptism, because we are baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Funny thing, I usually think of the sacrament of Christian baptism as calm and comforting. But now I can also see it as exciting and powerful and even driving and forceful.

Great! We, the baptized Christians are a force. We are a force for good in the world. We are a force for whatever God wants us to be doing, no matter what life hands us. We can live out our lives based on all that Jesus taught. We can live loving God, our neighbors, and ourselves. We are a force for love, for right, for grace, for mercy, for Jesus Christ, our Lord and our Savior.

We can follow in the footsteps of those earliest disciples, who took these marching orders from Jesus. Amen.

Presented by Reverend Sally J. DeMasters, May 24, 2020.

Memorial Day Prayer

Almighty God, before whom stand the living and the dead,
we your children, whose mortal life is but a hand's breadth, give thanks to you:
For all those through whom you have blessed our pilgrimage,
whose lives that have empowered us, whose influence is a healing grace,
We lift up thankful hearts.

For the dear friends and family members whose faces we see no more,
but whose love is with us forever,
We lift up thankful hearts.

For the teachers and companions of our childhood and youth,
and for the members of our household of faith who worship you now in heaven,
We lift up thankful hearts.

For those who sacrificed themselves,
our brothers and sisters who have given their lives in military service,
for the sake of others,
We lift up thankful hearts.

That we may hold them all in continual remembrance,
and ever think of them as with you
in that city whose gates are not shut by day and where there is no night,
We lift up thankful hearts.

Let us now be dedicated to working for a world where labor is rewarded,
health is recovered, fear dispelled, and the nations made one.

O Lord, save your people and bless your heritage.

Day by day we magnify you, and worship your name, forever and ever. Amen.