

June 5, 2011
Acts 1:6-14

South Plains
Ascension

Don't Just Stand There

Something about ascending, rising up in the air, allows us to gain a wider perspective on the world and to notice things. Brushing my teeth, I glanced out the bathroom window and looked down on the gate to our yard. Several years ago, Debby planted day lilies there. And, every spring the deer would nibble the foliage before the flowers could bloom. This year, somehow the deer have missed these day lilies. The yellow blossoms popped out against the green grass and caught my eye the way a baby in the nursing home draws attention. I called Debby to see.

No wonder those disciples stood gawking at the sky after Jesus ascended into heaven. What a sight? What an exit Jesus has made! One minute they are speculating with their Lord about the coming of the kingdom of God, and suddenly he shows them exactly what God's next step will be: Jesus disappears by ascending into a cloud.

What the dickens is God up to? Wouldn't it make more sense for Jesus to become the CEO of the church so he could oversee our mission? He would continue to provide the vision, lay out the strategy for expansion and make course corrections. That way he could select and train workers like you and me. When we messed up, as

we would, he could spot the problem immediately, call us aside to straighten us out, and even reassign believers when appropriate. Best of all, the church would still have her most effective recruiter, evangelist, defender and public spokesperson. Instead, he leaves us to do it.

On the assumption Jesus knows what God is doing, after the disciples are called back from their reverie by the men in white, they return to Jerusalem as instructed; presumably they go back to the same upper room where they celebrated the Passover with Jesus on the night of his betrayal. Luke takes the occasion to call the roll. Everybody is present, except Judas. A few verses later, he will be replaced by Matthias. The women who supported Jesus' ministry and who stayed with him at the cross are also present, including his mother Mary.

These are the people who will be Jesus' witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, even among the hated Samaritans, and to the ends of the earth. A witness needs to have two qualifications. First, he or she needs to have seen something, to have experienced significant events firsthand. Some of these disciples had been with Jesus for three years. They had heard the sermons, listened as he answered skeptics, and seen his healing miracles. Most importantly, they had witnessed his death and had touched and seen his resurrected body. That's their first qualification.

The second is courage. The word witness in the Bible comes from the courtroom just as it does for us

today. Judicial cases often turn on the testimony of eyewitnesses before a judge. It still happens. A pastor was taking a group of young women from her church down Afton Mountain when a truck that had been tailgating them got too close and caused an accident. In court, the pastor testified that the truck driver had been tailgating. The truck driver denied it. Conflicting eyewitness testimony. The judge asked him, "Did you realize you were behind a carload of girls?" "Well, yes," he replied. That decided the case. "If you could see who was in the car, you were too close. Guilty as charged," was the verdict. Many of the followers of Jesus who gathered in the upper room would be hauled before a magistrate and asked what they knew about Jesus. They would need courage to tell the truth whatever the consequences. The Greek word for witness gives us the English word "martyr." Witnesses to the gospel might become martyrs to the gospel.

We are not likely to be called to witness to our Christian faith in a court of law, at least not in the United States. But, suppose you are in another country where Christianity is regarded with suspicion and Christians are persecuted. If you were arrested and charged with being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? Would you be able to testify to what you have experienced of Jesus Christ? Could anyone swear that they could see you are a Christian?

Can't you imagine that when the disciples realized Jesus was gone, and when they thought about his

charge that they were to be his witnesses not only to their Jewish neighbors, but to all the world, when this reality began to sink in, they had some serious conversation in the upper room. Like the freedom riders in the civil rights movement, they would need to prepare themselves for persecution and violence. Like a witness in a courtroom trial, they would want to rehearse their story. Like an entrepreneur, they needed a plan to penetrate the world with God's love. And, like any church, they would make assignments.

I suppose all those needs came up in conversation as the fledging church prepared to test her wings, which meant testing the power of the Holy Spirit promised by Jesus. We share their worries and their sense of anticipation. We should be excited and nervous about the prospects for Jesus' church. The same opportunities and threats await us. I'm thankful to be part of a church that believes Jesus' charge to take the gospel first to our neighbors and ultimately to the ends of the earth is a commission directed squarely at us at South Plains.

Every story in scripture has two meanings: First, there's the meaning of the incident for the biblical characters who inhabit the story. In this case, the disciples of Jesus hear his parting promise, watch him ascend, and then return to Jerusalem to wait for the Holy Spirit.

The second meaning in this story is what it means to you and me. Every day that I pull into our parking lot, I

am tempted to stand there gazing at Kirk Hall, the way the first disciples gazed at the cloud. Maybe you share that feeling. Seeing this building rise out of the ground is not as dramatic as watching Jesus lifted up. But, it has caught the attention of lots of people. This is indeed a memorable time at South Plains. I suspect the heavenly messengers are saying to us what they said to the first disciples: "Why are you standing there, staring at a building."

We have work to do. We need to get busy. We are witnesses to what we have experienced of Christ. We don't have to go as far as Samaria before we will encounter people who do not share our beliefs or values but who are, like the Samaritan in the parable, good people. Even if we are never in court because of our Christianity, it will be challenged. We will be asked directly or indirectly what we know about Jesus, the Christ. Thank goodness, Jesus promised the power of the Holy Spirit. Pentecost is next Sunday.

Therefore, the first thing we need to do is to follow the example of the disciples after the ascension. Acts 1:14 says, "They were constantly devoting themselves to prayer." In the long, long journey of the Church, the first step is to pray. Just pray.

God in heaven, sometimes we forget that you are not only far removed from us in heaven, but also as near as our beating hearts. Often we ask for your help in crisis. Too often we rush ahead with our plans, relying

on cleverness and determination instead of resting in your grace. Give us patience to wait for the power of your Holy Spirit, humility to accept your timing, and courage to respond when you call upon us to speak and act in Jesus' name. Amen.