

“Joyful Waiting”

“And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the temple blessing God.”

As you approach the terminals at Toronto Pearson Airport, you are presented with two choices: arrivals and departures. The choice you make will not only lead you to different levels of the terminal, but also to two distinctly different areas not only in terms of purpose but in the atmosphere of each location. I noticed this the last time I traveled to the airport to pick up a friend who was visiting from Long Island. As I waited for her to come through the doors at International Arrivals after she had cleared customs, there was an atmosphere of joyful anticipation as people awaited the arrival of loved ones, some of whom they probably had not seen for a long time. As different people came through the sliding doors, you could hear cheers erupting in different parts of the waiting area, followed by hugs and tears of joy as they welcomed their loved ones. It was a place of great gladness and celebration as the people whose arrival they had anticipated finally appeared.

After our friend came through the doors and we greeted her, we had to walk through the departure area back to where my car was parked. As we walked through this area where people were preparing to fly to various destinations, it was clear that the atmosphere here was radically different from the arrival area. There were no cheers and cries of celebration; the tears that were being shed were tears of sadness as people bid each other farewell. While some of their departures may have been for short trips, others were probably departing without knowing when they would arrive back into the arms of their loved ones again. While the arrivals area was a place of great joy, the departure section of the airport was a place filled with sadness as people bid farewell to the ones they loved.

We would expect to find a similar atmosphere of sadness in today’s Gospel lesson as the disciples gather to bid farewell to the risen Christ. This reading from the end of the Gospel According to Luke is the Evangelist’s account of Jesus’ final appearance to his disciples before his ascension to heaven, of which we confess as a central tenet of our faith in the creeds:

- “On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead.” – Apostles Creed.
- “On the third day he rose again in accordance with the scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.” – Nicene Creed.

According to Luke’s chronology, the day of Jesus’ ascension falls forty days after Easter, placing it on a Thursday in the church calendar, which means that it is often overlooked in celebrations of the Easter season. But this moment in the life of Jesus and his disciples is an important one for us to consider, both in what it teaches us about this experience for the disciples and what it means for us who carry on their mission and ministry in our generation.

- “Ascension Day is not simply an essay about the future. It is not simply *bon voyage* to Jesus. It is not simply upward in focus. It has a downward, an earthly dimension as well, and that is where we come in, just as did the poor old disciples, to collect their wits about them once again and set about the dreary task of living until the kingdom comes.” – Peter Gomes.

The second part of the Risen Lord Jesus’ appearance to the Eleven and those who were with them looks both backward and forward; it serves both to bring closure by recapping major themes of the Gospel and to set the stage for the coming of the Holy Spirit and the work of the disciples as witnesses in Luke’s second volume, the Acts of the Apostles. Luke stresses that the gospel is in continuity with what God has been doing and planning in the Hebrew Scriptures; Christ’s teaching to his followers begins with his announcement that *“these are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you – that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.”* (Luke 24:44). Jesus refers to the Hebrew Scriptures by their three major sections: the Torah, the prophets, and the writings (known in Hebrew by the acronym *Tanakh*). The fulfillment of scripture is tied to the resurrection in the early church’s proclamation, as is written in Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians:

- “For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.” – 1 Corinthians 15:3-5.

This announcement of the fulfillment of scripture recalls both the three-part canon of Hebrew Scriptures as well as Jesus’ predictions of his passion earlier in the Gospel

(“*The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.*” – 9:22). From its opening words, Luke devotes his entire Gospel to “*the events that have been fulfilled among us*” (1:1).

Jesus’ statement about the fulfillment of scripture is followed by Luke’s report that “*he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, ‘thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.*” (24:45-47). The message of the Scriptures is not self-evident; one’s mind must be opened to it, and the message is rightly understood only in the light of Jesus’ death and resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit that will empower and enlighten the apostolic community.

- “I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy, and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith.” – Martin Luther, *Small Catechism*.

Luke gathers under the authority of Scripture not only the death and resurrection of Jesus but also the mission to all nations. The importance of Jerusalem as the center from which the Gospel was to go to all nations is in fulfillment of the words of the prophet Isaiah:

- “Many peoples shall come and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways, and that we may walk in his paths.’ For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.” – Isaiah 2:3.

The mission of the church in Acts is tied to the fulfillment of Scripture and will begin in Jerusalem and extend to all nations (“*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*” – Acts 1:8). Jerusalem will be the center and focus of the Gospel mission from the very beginning of the life and witness of the apostolic church, those who are called to be “witnesses” (*martyria*), a word that evolves in the course of the New Testament from the role of an eyewitness to those who can testify to the gospel to those who give their lives for the sake of the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This announcement of their role as

apostles, those who will be “sent out” as witnesses to the Gospel, is accompanied by a promise that *“I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”* (24:49). While Jesus does not refer to the Holy Spirit by name, he uses languages that indicates what this gift from on high will mean. The metaphor of being “clothed” is used in early baptismal teachings in the New Testament (*“For as many of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.”* – Galatians 3:27). “Power” (*dynamis*) has attended Jesus’ work throughout this Gospel (*“Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.”* – 4:14-15). The Risen Lord now promises to confer upon his disciples the same power he entrusted to them earlier in Luke (*“Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal.”* – 9:1-2). The conferring of the Spirit from on high will also fulfill the Scriptures (*“Then afterwards I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions”* – Joel 2:28, quoted in Acts 2:17). Jesus promises his disciples that there will be plenty of work for them to do, but for now they are to stay in Jerusalem (‘sit still’) and wait for the fulfillment of the Lord’s promises.

- “Jesus empowers his followers with ‘power and authority’ for their missionary work. He promises they will receive the Holy Spirit, enabling them to carry out their role. Jesus portrays God as a generous Lord who gives the Spirit to his people.” – Michael Joseph Brown.

Luke is the only Gospel that chronicles the departure of Jesus at his ascension. The ascension both closes the period of Jesus’ ministry and opens the period of the church’s mission. The Risen Lord’s appearance to the Eleven began with a note of terror and confusion (*“They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost”* – 24:37). Now, after the proofs, the instruction from Scripture, and the commission, Jesus *“led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them”* (24:50). The blessing is a priestly act in which Jesus places his disciples in the care and favour of God; *“even before the promised Holy Spirit comes, the disciples are assured of Jesus’ kind presence”* (Fred Craddock). While Jesus is blessing them, *“he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven”* (24:51).

- “Jesus ascends into heaven, signifying the completion of his mission with his ‘return into heaven’ denoting his departure’s finality and glorified status. The ascension symbolizes Jesus’ elevated status visibly and tangibly. It proves that his humility

and suffering did not disqualify him from fulfilling his mission, and God fully embraced it.” – Brown.

We would expect that the disciples would be filled with sadness at Jesus’ departure as those in the departure area at Pearson are saddened by their farewells to their loved ones; but instead, Luke reports that “*they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.*” (24:52-53). The disciples are not dejected or downcast by the departure of Christ, nor do they look longingly back to Galilee and the life they knew before Jesus called them to follow him. Instead, they wait in joyful anticipation for the fulfillment of the promised empowerment that will give them the ability to become witnesses to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They know that even though Jesus has departed from their sight for this moment, they have not been orphaned or abandoned because they live in the sure and certain hope that God is faithful and will fulfill all that has been promised them through their Risen Lord, and that the day will come when the one who has departed from them for a time will come again and will gather them into his eternal home, where they will “*dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*” (Psalm 23:6).

- “Despite the tremendous odds and every indication to the contrary, we are not alone. God has given us three things with which to carry on until he shall come again. He has given us the Spirit, the comforter who is the remembrance of what was and the sign of what is to be while he aids us in managing what is … He has also given us the Church, the body of his fellowship whose sacraments, word, and ministry transcend the boundaries of time and the frailties of the human condition; and, dear friends, he has given us one another, imperfect though we may be, as colleagues in the adventure of faithful living. These are imperishable and rich gifts, and we despise them at our peril.” – Gomes.

On this Mothers’ Day, we honour mothers and those women who have provided motherly care for us. For some, it is a day to gather with these women for celebrations at family homes and dinner tables. For others, it is a day of remembrance of those mothers whose life among us has come to an end. It can be a day of thanksgiving for the lives we shared, but it can also be a day of sadness that they are gone from our sight and a day when we cannot join with those whose mothers are still physically present to celebrate. But while remembrance of the faithful departed can be a time of sadness, we can share in the joy of the disciples on the day of Jesus’ departure because we know that because we live in the assurance of everlasting life through the death and resurrection of our Lord, even as we mourn we can live in the hope that the day will surely come when the Lord will come again and will gather us into our eternal home, where we will be joined with our Saviour

and all his children in that place where “*death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away*” (Revelation 21:4). As the disciples waited with joy because they knew that the Word of God was trustworthy and true, we can also wait for that day when Christ will come again and will bring us to that place where nothing will separate us from the love of God that is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord.

- “Though we are still in this world, we no longer belong to it. Our faith allows us even now to be members of God’s household, and taste even now the inexhaustible love of God. It is this knowledge of where we truly belong that sets us free to be fierce resisters against death while humbly, compassionately, and joyfully proclaiming life wherever we go.” – Henri Nouwen.

As I drove back from the airport, I thought of those people in the departure area shedding tears of sadness as they bid farewell to their loved ones. One day, they will hopefully find themselves in the arrivals area, where their sadness will be turned to joy when once again they are in the presence of those they love. In the times of sadness and loss that we experience, may we live in the blessed assurance of the disciples who were filled with joy even after Jesus’ ascension, knowing that God is faithful and the day will surely come when “*we will be joined as one and hope to meet again.*”

Amen.