

May 13, 2018 – Acts 1:12-26; 1 John 5:9-15; John 17:11b-19

In our readings for today, we heard about an event that used to be a pretty major festival in the church: the Ascension. The moment when Christ commands his disciples to go into Jerusalem and all Judea and Samaria and into the ends of the earth. And then he himself ascends into heaven. Leaving the disciples dumbstruck by what they've just seen. Left with only the promise that he will return one day just as they saw him go.

The Feast of the Ascension was, until relatively recently, one of the major midweek festivals of the church year. Once upon a time, there were two big church services that happened on Thursdays: Maundy Thursday and Ascension Thursday. Like ours, many churches no longer do much for Ascension Day. But it's still there on the church calendar. And it's still worth discussing.

Because Jesus' ascension changed things. It changed the church. It changed how we function as disciples of Jesus Christ. I spoke last week about how Jesus told His disciples that He no longer considered them servants, but instead he considered them friends. Because now they knew Him and trusted Him.

That relationship and that trust become pretty important when Jesus literally just flies away. Vanishes into thin air. And I'm sure the big question on their minds is, "What now?" We've always been servants and students and followers, with Jesus physically right in front of us. How do we function on our own?

And that's kind of remained the key question of Christianity ever since. What now? What does it mean to be a disciple of the risen and ascended Jesus Christ? How do we cope – how do we thrive – when our Lord is sitting on the throne of heaven? When He's not standing right in front of us?

Well, I think the example of the disciples, and the counsel of St John, and the words of Jesus in our Gospel lesson help to fill in these blanks for us. And to start, there is one key thing we see reiterated in all three lessons: Pray.

The disciples come back from the Mount of Olives after the Ascension. They're confused. They're scared. They're alone. But they know exactly what to do.

*"All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer."* They devoted themselves to prayer. It became the central activity of their lives. They didn't know what all this meant. But they knew they needed to pray about it.

They were so convinced by the power of prayer, that they let prayer alone decide who should be the apostle to replace Judas the betrayer. *"You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two You have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside."*

Think about that for a second. Every one of the 12 disciples was hand selected by Jesus. Every one of them remembered that moment when Jesus walked up to him and said, "Come, follow me." Which means this isn't just some vague prayer for guidance that they're making here. They are asking Jesus through prayer to reach down from heaven, point to one man, and say once again, "Come, follow me." Just as if He were standing right in front of them. That's how effective prayer is.

Of course, that shouldn't surprise us. St John was there, among the disciples. And he spells it out for us in his epistle: *"This is the confidence that we have toward [Jesus], that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him."*

That's prayer in a nutshell. Ask according to God's will and you will be heard. Ask according to God's will and you will receive according to God's will. The disciples believed that promise. They built the Church on that promise. What does it mean to be a disciple of the risen and ascended Jesus Christ? It means praying to the risen and ascended Jesus Christ.

But it means more than that too. Because pretty quickly, it seems, after the ascension the disciples know that they need to select a new apostle. Why? What's wrong with 11? What's so important about having apostles anyway?

Well, Peter himself explains that to us. Because he emphasizes two key traits that the apostle they chose must have. He must have been a long time disciple of Jesus. Learning from Him from the time of Jesus' baptism all the way until his ascension. But second, he must be a witness to the resurrection.

And that's an important characteristic for us. None of us can be an apostle like they were. Because none of us were alive when Jesus was alive. But we can still learn what Christ taught. And we can, most of all, be a witness to the resurrection.

That's the reason the apostles so quickly chose another man to fill their ranks. They wanted another witness to the resurrection. They wanted a church founded not on the blood of a dead martyr, but on the living hope of their Lord and Savior. Led by men who would confidently proclaim the power and love of a man who rose from the dead. And a God who raises us from the dead.

What does it mean to be a disciple of the risen and ascended Jesus Christ? It means being a witness to his resurrection and ascension. It means confidently proclaiming with one voice that same power and love.

Of course, that's easier said than done. Jesus Himself knew that. Long before the disciples prayed to Jesus for guidance in the midst of their confusion, Jesus prayed for His disciples. We hear a portion of that prayer today. And it is filled with all the love and concern of a father for his children.

It's funny, really. Over and over again in the gospels, we hear about the disciples enthusiastically promising to defend their Lord. We even see Peter drawing his sword and striking the servant of the high priest.

And yet, what Jesus says in this prayer, is that all this time, He's been the one protecting them. *"I have guarded them and not one of them has been lost."* He is their guardian, the shepherd, their champion. But soon, He'll be leaving them. And He knows that they'll be confused and afraid and alone.

And rightfully so. Because the world hates them. The world hates us. People hate anything they don't understand. And no one understands us. We are not of the world. And Jesus knows that's a rough place to be. He knows that we're going to be asking, "What now?"

And so He prays for us. But He doesn't just go off to a quiet place to pray by Himself. No, He lets the disciples – he lets us - hear His prayer. He lets us know exactly what His Father's will is for us.

It's His Father's will that we are one as He and His Father are one. That, like the incomprehensible Trinity of one God in three persons, we become one Church in many people. United by the power of Jesus' name. And stronger than the evil one who tries to destroy us because of that name we bear.

It's His Father's will that we have joy. The joy of Jesus Christ. The joy of God's Word fulfilled. The joy of the resurrection. The joy of sins forgiven. And the joy of forgiving sins.

And finally, it's His Father's will that we be sanctified in the truth. That we be sanctified in the Word. To be sanctified is to be set apart for a purpose. To be made holy for a purpose. And what is that purpose?

That purpose is to be sent into the world. To make disciples of all nations through the sanctification of Baptism – like little Caleb this morning – and through the teaching of God's Word. That purpose is to be sanctified by receiving Christ's body and blood, given and shed for the forgiveness of all our sins.

That purpose is to go, knowing that Christ Himself goes with us in Word and Sacrament. That He did not simply ascend into heaven and abandon us to a sinful earth. But that He is still with us. That we can still turn to Him confidently in prayer. We can still witness His resurrection. We can still experience His unity and joy even in the midst of division and sorrow.

And that, most of, when we are confused or scared or alone or just asking “What now?” We can still feel him reaching out to us in water and bread and wine and know that we are not alone. We go, but He goes with us. And remains with us to the very end of the age. Amen.