

ACTS 1:21-22

WHAT TO PREACH?

Our reading from the book of Acts begins with the apostles returning to Jerusalem. Where did they return from? Three days ago the church celebrated the Ascension of Jesus, and that's what they were returning from. The reading for the Ascension comes right before our reading, and so it's best to read it to let us know what just happened before we get into today's text.

Acts 1:1-11. Here Luke writes, "In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when He was taken up, after He had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom He had chosen. To them He presented Himself alive after His suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

And while staying with them He ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, He said, "you heard from Me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

So when they had come together, they asked Him, "Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by His own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." And when He had said these things, as they were looking on, He was lifted up, and a cloud took Him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as He went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw Him go into heaven."

"You will be My witnesses", and "Then they returned to Jerusalem." Witnesses to what? Our reading gives us a pretty good idea as to what the apostles, the disciples, pastors today and all Christians are to be witnesses to. Our reading is about picking a replacement for Judas who betrayed Jesus. In this process to find a replacement Peter lays out what a witness should know about Jesus, and what are the important things that we should witness about.

He begins with the life and times of Jesus, saying "all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us." Too often sermons aren't about Jesus. They're reduced to how you can have a better family life, be a better husband, be a better wife, be good children. They cover things such as managing your finances so that you can be more prosperous. It's called the prosperity gospel. There's also a social gospel, and an environmental gospel, but there's little about Jesus. And yet what Peter says we should be witnessing to focuses

entirely on Jesus, “beginning from the baptism of John until the day when Jesus was taken up from us — one of these men must become with us a witness to His resurrection.””

From Jesus’ baptism to His resurrection, to His ascension, which they just witnessed, they and we are now to become witnesses. I should never need to ask myself what I should be preaching on. You should never be wondering what I’m going to be preaching on. You should never be wondering what you should be telling your friends about. We should all be speaking about the life and times of Jesus from His baptism, through His resurrection, to His ascension.

If a sermon doesn’t include these things, then it’s not a sermon. It might be a good Bible study, or a motivational speech on how you can live a better life, but it’s not a sermon, and it doesn’t belong as the central part of our worship service. Yet, pastors and lay people often wonder how we can say the same things week after week, and it still be meaningful and hold the people’s attention. The Christian message is really short and simple.

Jesus, the Son of God, was born a man for you so that He could fulfill God’s Law for you, because you can’t fulfill God’s Law, and then Jesus died on a cross to pay your penalty for not fulfilling God’s law, and then Jesus rose from the dead, defeating sin, death and the devil so that you may rise to experience eternal life with God. He then ascended into heaven and intercedes for you before God the Father for the forgiveness of your sins, and He’ll come back to take you to heaven. End of sermon.

How many different ways can you say that week after week and still have people want to hear it? People tell me that they’ve heard it all before. They don’t need to hear it again. You had supper last night. Why should you have supper tonight. Because you need to nourish your body, and you also need to nourish your soul.

To that point I’m going to let you hear how a few others tell this message about Jesus, and let you experience how differently this can be said, and hopefully you realise that this isn’t a simple message, and that there’s no end to you coming to know what Jesus did for you.

While speaking on the Ascension Day text here are a few things that Dr. Peter Nafzger, professor of preaching at Concordia Seminary St. Louis, had to say. “This shapes everything the apostles preach. It should shape how every Christian lives their entire lives. If it’s all true, and this Jesus who ascended in blessing is going to come back in the same way that should change everything for you. Yes, it’s hard to wrap our minds around; it’s hard to imagine that everything is different in light of Jesus. Thus this life of Jesus should be our constant meditation. Do you anticipate that Jesus is coming back in power,

personally for His people? You don't need to understand how, just anticipate, having faith because you know Jesus' life. Don't feel that there's no use to what we do as Christians and as the church, because this Jesus who has overcome sin, death and the devil through His death and resurrection, even now reigns and will return."

While speaking about how a person might be saved Rev. Dr. David Nehrenz, president of the Oklahoma District said, "the Bible teaches that we are saved solely because of the merits of our Lord Jesus Christ in our place, and the whole Holy Week with His crucifixion and then His resurrection on Easter and then His ascension to the right hand of God and then the coming of the Holy Spirit. What's called the 50 days of Easter is all about Christ's atoning sacrifice for us. ...

How are we saved? God the Father sent His son who promised the coming of the Holy Spirit. ... The Holy Spirit works in the hearts of people to repent of their sins and believe Christ is the atoning sacrifice for my sin.

How are we saved? By Jesus Christ alone through faith in Him. ... It's not that I hope to be saved. It's I know for certain I have the gift of eternal life, forgiveness, and salvation because of the merits of Christ Jesus our Lord. We are indeed saved by grace through faith alone in our Lord Jesus Christ."

So that's two prominent pastors in our church, a seminary professor and a district president giving two very different messages about Jesus. But what about you in the pew? How can you witness about Jesus?

Kari Vo writes daily devotions for the Lutheran Hour. Last week she wrote that "Paul never makes the mistake so many of us do nowadays. He tells everyone about Jesus and the cross, but he never, ever, forgets the resurrection. And that's important for so many reasons.

The first is kind of obvious. If we tell our non-Christian friends about Jesus, they need to know He's alive today, right? We don't want to leave them with the impression that He's dead and gone, out of reach — that they can't speak to Him, trust in Him, or rely on Him for help. Jesus is alive and with us forever, just as He promised. And now we're waiting for Him to return visibly from heaven at the end of the world.

But there's so many more reasons to talk about Jesus' resurrection! Because Jesus is alive, we know that His death was a victory, not a defeat. In fact, His suffering and death was God's own victory over sin, death, and evil — breaking their power over the whole human race. Now everyone who trusts in Jesus has life, forgiveness, and peace with God, starting now. And we will be with Him in God's kingdom forever."

Yes, you too can tell people about Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension, so that they too may have eternal life. Amen.