

“With Joy” – Luke 24:44-53 – Ascension Sunday

As you may know, I was in Calgary earlier this week to attend the meeting of the Western Han-Ca Presbytery (as the representative from Westminster Presbytery). It was a short trip, up on Tuesday at noon, arriving just in time for a great feed of Korean food before the meeting, then a quick overnight stay in the ‘luxurious’ surroundings of the Quality Inn near the airport, and an early morning flight back the next morning, arriving in time to be in the office around 10:00. But it was also a great trip, as I was warmly welcomed at the meeting (I’m almost family there, now), and the weather was superb, both in Calgary and for both flights. I had a superb view of New Denver on the way out – could even clearly identify the cemetery where my grandparents are buried.

There were lots of ‘memory moments’ from that trip, short as it was. The one that came to my mind when working on this sermon occurred at the Calgary Airport as I was checking in for the homeward flight. Ahead of me was a son, about the age of my eldest son, seeing his father off on a flight. He could only go as far as the first security screening, of course, and had to turn back there. The parting involved the usual ‘male’ denials – stiff upper lips, no outward expressions of deep emotion – but the emotions were there just the same. As the son turned away after saying goodbye and passed by me, I could tell he was a bit reflective, as we all are at such times. When we send someone off on a significant trip, we never know when or even if we will see him or her again, and there is always a tinge of suppressed sadness on such an occasion. The longer the trip, the more remote the destination, the deeper we feel the sense of separation.

And so when looking at the reaction of the disciples as Jesus departed on what must have seemed a ‘last trip’, I was struck by the reporting in Luke’s gospel that instead of being sad, instead of being depressed and disconsolate, the disciples reacted with rejoicing – they went back to the city “with great joy”. Here in this story of significant, serious parting, as Jesus is lifted up into heaven, we have a totally different, totally unexpected ending, with the disciples not being devastated, as we would expect them and ourselves to be, but instead being joyful. How can this be?

Let’s go back a little, before we come upon the scene in our reading. Most of us can recall some of the details of the encounter between the newly risen Jesus and some followers on the road to Emmaus, how he walked with them, and talked with them as they discussed the traumatic events that had recently overwhelmed them. We even remember how he talked with them about how the scriptures pointed to him, but they couldn’t see him as Jesus until he broke bread with them at the table, and how in that communion act they saw him clearly as the Messiah. Fewer of us, perhaps could go on with the story from that point, recalling how those two ran back to Jerusalem to excitedly tell the others about what had happened, and how Jesus had pointed out to them that the scriptures had clearly pointed to him as the Messiah. The account of Jesus appearing to the disciples in Jerusalem is much more familiar to us, and while Luke doesn’t focus the doubt on Thomas, indeed doesn’t even mention him, he still shows the disciples to be full of doubt and even suspicion that they were seeing a ghost. Jesus both reassures them with an offer of peace and with a demonstration of eating some BBQ’d fish (we all know that ghosts don’t eat!).

This is where we come upon the scene, and these are the events referred to when the text continues, “THEN he said to them ... yadda, yadda, yadda” In one ear, and out the other. Can two in ten of us recall (without looking at the book) what Jesus then said to them? Could the disciples? I’m not sure. For us, the problem is familiarity, if not boredom. We’ve heard the words before, and we nod, and say, “yeah, I know”, but if we were pressed to even state what Jesus was talking about, never mind quoting him verbatim, I’m pretty sure we couldn’t.

I can understand why the disciples might have had trouble remembering exactly what he said, given their emotional state. Think about their situation – here’s their leader, their rabbi, their teacher,

mentor, friend, so recently executed horribly, standing with them in the room like nothing had happened! They were “startled and terrified” the text tells us – I would guess so!! I’m not sure we can truly even begin to understand their terror and their confusion. And that confusion got worse – after his “yadda, yadda” speech Jesus led them a short way out of town, blessed them, and then left them again, this time in a way that they had no words even to describe! I think we could cut the disciples enough slack to forgive them if they were at that stage a gathering of gibbering idiots.

But they weren’t. They weren’t even sad. They were no longer afraid. They were no longer terrified. They went back to Jerusalem, as we are told, “with great joy”. Not hanging their heads in sorrow, not teary-eyed at the separation, but “with great joy”. Not just “with joy”, but “with great joy”. How could this be? What could possibly account for them being instead of sad beyond belief, being joyful?

Well, they weren’t joyful because Jesus left them. Their elation wasn’t necessarily even because of the way he left them. Their joy was because of the “yadda, yadda”. What Jesus said to them was what caused them to be so joyful, and so we must pay attention to what is what he said.

Recall again what the excited disciples said to themselves when they recognized Jesus at table after the road to Emmaus experience: “did not our hearts burn within us while he was talking on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” Again, as Jesus encountered them in that room in Jerusalem, 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. You are witnesses of these things. And see, 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.’” Can you hear why it is so important that we hear clearly, and remember clearly, what Jesus said to the disciples in that room, why we cannot be content with hearing what he said as just so much “yadda, yadda”?

There are two really important things that Jesus said to them, and says to us still, in that message. The first is the part I emphasized – “that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations”. Jesus also pointed out, again, how the scriptures pointed to him as Messiah, that his rising from death was neither an accident nor a stunt, but was a clear scriptural signal of his one-ness with God, the Father. Jesus showed them, and us, how he was the fulfillment of the scriptures and indeed the Messiah. We might be more familiar with his other declaration, “all power in heaven and earth has been given to me by the Father”, but whichever way we recognize it, the message is clear that when Jesus speaks it is the word of God being spoken.

And thus we can take the first word he speaks as the risen Messiah as foundational, as defining the central focus and emphasis of what we are to understand about God’s intent and meaning. And what is that first and foundational word? “Repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations.” If that were the only thing we extracted from the yadda, yadda we would be on the right road. If that was the only thing we could remember as being pronounced by Jesus we would not go too far astray from God’s will for us and for the whole world: “that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations.” Roll this message around on your tongue; let the impact of this magnificent proclamation of God’s grace echo and bounce around in your head; feel your heart burn within you as Jesus’ understanding of scripture is opened to you: “that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations.”

But there’s even more. There is a second part to Jesus’ message to his disciples, and eventually to us. “You are witnesses of these things”, he told them, “and see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised”. What had the Father had promised? The Advocate, the Counselor, the pneumatos, the Holy Spirit. We remember that the disciples wouldn’t have long to wait in Jerusalem for the event

we celebrate as Pentecost – indeed we will celebrate this miraculous event next week – the fulfillment of that very promise of the Holy Spirit coming upon them. They didn't know, couldn't know how short the time would be, but they were certain that what he had promised would happen because the promise of receiving the Holy Spirit had been affirmed by the risen Christ himself.

At last we can begin to understand why the disciples would be filled with great joy, rejoicing and constantly praising God in the temple. Their eyes were opened, their minds were opened, their hearts were opened, their souls were opened to the understanding of the scriptures made clear by the risen Christ, "that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations", and that far from being separated from Christ they would live with him in the power of the Holy Spirit. No longer a message of "watch out, one misstep and God'll getcha!", no more "one sin and you're banished from God's presence", no more trying to earn favour with God, but instead a message of forgiveness available, not just for a favoured few, but for all nations, all peoples, anyone who calls upon the name of the Messiah, the Christ, Jesus our Lord and saviour. No wonder they were filled with great joy, as Jesus gave them a future, not just a past. He moved them from the past, talking about these insights, into the future, talking about what they were to do, and they set about those tasks with great joy, praising God.

And now the impact of Jesus' first message as the risen Christ comes home to us. Now it is time for Jesus to open our hearts and minds to the understanding of scripture, that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations. We don't need to wait for power from on high, we have already received that power in the Holy Spirit, and so we are already filled with joy as we move from thinking and talking about the past into working for the future. The task is now ours to continue that proclamation. The proclamation of this message of grace started from Jerusalem, just as Jesus said. It has expanded throughout Judea, and to the ends of the earth. But that message of repentance and forgiveness of sins in his name still needs to be proclaimed. The message of forgiveness needs to be proclaimed right here in our neighbourhood. We need to proclaim that profound message of God's acceptance with our love, with our acceptance, with our generosity, with our involvement and caring, with our support and patience. Most of all we need to continue to proclaim that most important message the same way the original disciples did, with great joy, and rejoicing, and with continual praising of God.

That is our task, as disciples in turn, but the word 'task' sounds like such a burden, doesn't it? That joyful task is not a burden, though – proclaiming that message of forgiveness in Christ's name is still the same cause for celebration and joy that it was when Christ first announced it so many years ago. Hearing, and proclaiming that message is at the heart of our faith, and burns like a fire in our hearts, fuelling the great joy of this wonderful message of redemption and grace, all in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour, ascended into heaven to sit with the Father, and with the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.