MOVING ON
Scripture: Acts 12:15-26 and Psalm 1

FOCUS: Like the disciples on the mountain, we need to encounter wonders of God, but as we do we are called to move on, to be about the mission of taking the gospel to all the world.

Thursday was Ascension Day, one of several holy days of obligation, days on which faithful Catholics are, at least in theory, expected to attend mass in honor and remembrance of some particularly significant event in the life of the early church. We Protestants don’t have days of obligation as such, though we do honor several of the same days as particularly significant. Some of those distinctly Catholic days are rather odd. For example, August 15 is the celebration of the Assumption of Mary. On that day the faithful celebrate and honor the wonder of Mary being bodily taken directly into heaven upon her death. But there is a real problem here. Nowhere in scripture is there any reference to such having occurred. In fact it only became a day of obligation in 1950 when it was declared to be an additional obligatory feast day by Pope Pius XII based only on legend and very obscure references to a couple of verses of scripture which actually had nothing to do with Mary.

I think we are well served to avoid such dubious festivals. But in the case of the Ascension, I am convinced we are poorer for not giving more attention to the wonder and the challenge inherent in its observance. The events of which we have read this morning come immediately after the disciples have experienced the Ascension. We need to be informed by that context as we uncover the message implicit in the choosing of a replacement for Judas.

Ascension Day falls forty days after Easter. Luke, the author of the book of Acts, tells of the various appearances Jesus made to the disciples and others over that forty day period. He reminds the reader that in those numerous face to face meetings Jesus gave instruction concerning matters of the kingdom of God to those whose lot would be to continue the ministry he had commenced. Luke makes it clear, for Luke was surely witness to most of the appearances, that what they had experienced was the living presence of Jesus, not some dream, not some ghostly apparition, but a living, breathing Jesus, returned from beyond the grave to give some final instructions to those who would be left to spread his message of love, grace and salvation.

We read in the gospels of some of those appearances and know from the reactions recorded there that the disciples were more than a little unnerved by the appearance of one who’s execution and burial they had witnessed, especially when he appeared to them out of nowhere in a room behind a closely guarded and locked door. But over those forty days they must have become at least a bit more comfortable with such encounters as they were repeated. The last time Jesus appeared we are told that, as the disciples gathered, they had a question for him. The nature of that question reveals that even then, after witnessing the suffering, death and resurrection of Holy Week and participating in numerous post resurrection appearances they were still mistaken about the nature of God’s kingdom. ***“So tell us Jesus, now that you are back, that means you are here to rescue the Kingdom of Israel from the Romans like we expected you to do in the first place, right?”***

You see even after the resurrection, even after forty days of instruction in matters of eternal importance, the disciples are still thinking about getting a corner office in the palace once Jesus overthrows the occupying roman government. Even after all they had witnessed the disciples were still thinking about matters of this world and of worldly power. I wonder sometimes if we twenty-first century Christians are any more aware. Are we really interesting in hearing the message Jesus clearly offers in places like the Sermon on the Mount, messages which speak unmistakably about love, service, sacrifice and compassion? Or are we more interested in finding a few verses here and there that support our prejudices and, which taken out of context, allow us to adopt a prosperity theology which feeds our arrogance and encourages us to adopt a misplaced attitude of superiority.

Jesus reply to the ignorance of the disciples is swift as would be his response to ours. ***“You really don’t get it do you? This thing called faith is not about the kind of stuff with which you are concerned. It is not about the restoration of an earthly kingdom, a restoration which may or may not ever occur. It is not about your personal comfort, it isn’t about privilege or prosperity. Faith is about allowing the Holy Spirit to guide you into sacrificial, loving service.”***

Then Jesus offers an amazing promise and a challenging commission. He tells the disciples they will receive power as the Holy Spirit comes upon them and declares that they will be his witnesses in all the world. Then, he is gone, lifted up from the top of the mountain on which they were gathered and taken through the clouds to his permanent home with the Father. And the disciples just stood there looking up.

Imagine what must have been going through their minds. Consider how amazing and completely inexplicable all that had happened to them was. They were no more prepared for all the wonder, all the unearthly events than would we be if Jesus were to walk through our door during my sermon. They had been struggling to comprehend what it all meant. They had perhaps become a least a bit comfortable with the appearances of one who had once been dead, for it had happened enough times that it was no longer a complete surprise. But they were unprepared for this final other worldly manifestation of God’s power. So they just stood there looking up. They must have wondered what might be coming next.

Then we are told that two men in white robes appeared standing next to them. Had I been there I would have expected to hear some sort of explanation, some word of encouragement or comfort. But instead there were words of challenge. ***“Why are you just standing there looking up? Jesus will be back one day.”*** There is an important implied message here. The two men in whiter were not telling them just to take it easy to go about their business comforted by the notion of Jesus return. The words were meant to challenge, to commission, to send out to be about the work they were called to in the mean time between Jesus ascension and his ultimate return.

So the eleven went back into the city and gathered with a large number of the faithful. It was Peter who took the bull by the horns, wasn’t it always he who did that. He briefly addressed the horrible end which Judas brought upon himself by his rebellion. Then he turned to practical business. I hear him saying, ***“There is work to be done, we need to move on, to be about kingdom building so let’s replace Judas, get our numbers back up to quota and be about doing the work of ministry and apostleship.”***

One of the more interesting and provocative methods of Bible study is one I learned many years ago when I first participated in Disciple. What you do is to take a passage and rewrite it so that it delivers a message exactly the opposite of what is intended. You ought to try it some time. One of the disturbing things I encounter by doing so is that I often discover that I can see my reflection in the contradictory paraphrase.

As I thought about the calling which is ours, to be witnesses to all the world, and as I pondered the power of God’s Spirit which is offered to us just as it was to the disciples, I thought about the words of the Psalm which we have heard this morning. There we encounter the stark difference between being those of the world and those of God who are in the world. As I considered the contrast and confronted the difficult truth that I am at times very much of the world, I decided to do that reverse paraphrase thing. This is what I came up with.

***“Blessed are those who heed the advice of scoundrels, who follow the lead of the deceitful, who listen to the constant negative chatter of cable news, scour social media for the latest scandal and who never miss out on office gossip gatherings.***

***They don’t have to be bothered with all those God rules, they can pursue their selfish agendas all day long and well into the night. They drink down the waters of greed and selfishness and bear much fruit: jealousy, hatred, prejudice, neglect, abuse and pride. Their egos are alive, well fed and pampered, but their spirits are dry.***

***By deceit and selfishness they build up material monuments and inflated resumes as they convince themselves that they have it made, that their academic, civic and professional accomplishments make them better than others. Compared to them, by the world’s standards, the godly are like dust in the wind, barely noticed by the movers and shakers, the politicians, the pampered rich and the social climbers. The godly are of no consequence to those who run the world. You see the devil rules, directs and rewards those deceived by the alluring guise of evil, but has no use for the godly.”***

 It is our challenge, our calling, to become more and more fully those who flee from the temptation to follow those who would call us to be of the world and turn to the way of those who are blessed, who refuse to follow the ways of the wicked and instead delight in God’s law of love and grace, who avoid scoffers and stay off the paths trod by evil doers. We are called to follow instead the narrow way of the one who gave his life for us, the way that leads to the kingdom of God.

Like the disciples we are occasionally those who stand at the proverbial mountaintop and who witness there wonderful things. Sometimes it happens here as we gather for worship and the Spirit is able to move freely because we welcome it. Sometimes it may be during a time of personal devotion or as we simply sit in awe of God’s power. I had that kind of experience Thursday afternoon as I was working on this sermon. I saw the lights flicker and opened the office door to see that there were clouds building and lightening flashing in the background. Soon the rains came and the winds tossed the trees and for several minutes I just sat at the door and watched in awe. But eventually I had to get back to the task at hand.

In a couple of weeks Frank and Rita Moore and I will be your delegates to Annual Conference. Conference is part interesting and important discussion, part excruciatingly dull business, but for me the best part is the always inspiring worship and the challenging Bible Studies. I have had many mountaintop experiences at conference. It is good to gather with fellow United Methodist Christians from throughout Alabama and West Florida for these inspiring moments. For three days we are apart from all the routines and pressures of our normal assignments. It is good to be away. But once conference is over there is work to be done, ministry to be about, jobs to do. On Ascension Day the disciples were called to come off the mountain, called to anoint a replacement for the one lost.

You see after all was said and done, it was time for the disciples to move on, to remember for all time the wonders they had seen as they moved forward into the mission for which they were created. It was time for them to join with their new member, Matthias, in ministry and apostleship. So it is with us. It is good to go to the mountaintop, in fact it is necessary. But we are not called to stay there, there is too much work to be done down in the valleys of real, everyday life.

There is a fable which tells of a woman who was religious, devout and filled with love for God. Each morning she would walk to the parish church for a time of the brief daily service and a time of prayer and meditation. On her way children would call out to her, beggars would accost her, ship keepers would try to greet her, but so immersed was she in her devotions that she did not even see them. Then one day she walked down the street as was her custom and arrived at the church just in time for the service. She pushed the door, but it would not open. She pushed it again harder, and found the door was locked. Distressed at the thought that she would miss service for the first time in years and not knowing what to do, she looked up. And there, right before her face, she found a note pinned to the door. It said, “I’m out there!”

To be sure, there are times when we all need the encouragement of gatherings like this and like our times on Wednesday. It is a very good thing to come into God’s house to be nourished. Nourishment is important. Our bodies tell us that. We need to eat, probably not as much as we do, but we need regular meals. Yet we wouldn’t accomplish much if we simply spent all of our time around the buffet table at our favorite restaurant and never walked outside. So it is when it comes to gathering here, to coming to church. The nourishment is essential. But like those disciples who stood on the mountain and experienced the wonder of the ascension and heard the angles ask, ***“Why are you just standing here looking up?”,*** we need to hear the voices that would ask us why we are just sitting here marveling at the wonder of it all when there is work to be done, when those to whom we are called, those Jesus tells us are in a very real way his embodiment in our midst, are out there dying to be nourished.

It is good to go to the mountaintop, but once we have been there, once we have been fed it is time to move on, time to be about the business of building the kingdom, time to meet Jesus out there.. For your sake, for the sake of a world full of waiting souls and for the sake of the one who seeks to lead them all home, let it be so. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN.