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St. John's Lutheran Church of Burlington  
12 May 2024

Sermon on Acts 1:1-11

Worship Theme:

**CHRIST'S ASCENSION MEANS HE IS CLOSER THAN EVER**

Since Christ has ascended into heaven, does that mean he is further away from us than when he was visibly on earth? Not at all! If you want to hear Jesus speak, simply open his Word and listen to his powerful, life-giving voice. Christ's ascension marks the completion of his earthly mission, but it does not signify the end of his work. From heaven Christ exercises his limitless authority for the Church as we carry out our mission to be Christ's ambassadors of grace to the world.

Sermon Theme: "Why Are You Still Here?"

1. Isn't Jesus Gone?
2. Jesus Isn't Gone!

Grace, and mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our risen AND ASCENDED Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. AMEN!

**"Why are you still here?"** I wonder how much the question caught them off guard. The disciples were walking and talking with Jesus and it seemed like the good old days were back! Jesus had gone through that dreadful week of suffering which ended with him dying on the cross, but now it was almost back to normal! Miracle of miracles, Jesus hadn't stayed dead – he came back to life! Now he was with them again, just like he used to be! And, truthfully, that was all they wanted – a Jesus who was with them, walking and talking with them, eating with them, teaching them, and doing all the wonderful "Messiah" things!

As they were going along, Jesus was saying something about time and power and the Holy Spirit, and then suddenly he turned around, looked at them all, raised his hands in blessing, AND LIFTED UP INTO THE AIR!! ...And just like that, Jesus was gone. Confused and surprised, they just stood there staring at the sky wondering where he went and if he were coming back. They were so focused that it seems they barely noticed when two angels joined them and asked, "*Why do you stand here looking into the sky?* **Why are you still here?**"

No doubt a number of thoughts went through their minds: "Well, where else should we be? Jesus is here. Or at least, he was. But if he's gone... Our lives completely fell apart not that long ago because he was dead, so what are we going to do now?! We still had so many questions for him and so much we wanted to learn from him and we always felt safer with him around. If he's really gone this time, we're in serious trouble."

And that was 2,000 years ago. If you and I really believe what the Bible says, then Jesus physically left this world 2,000 years ago and no one has seen him since, which begs the question, **Why are you still here? Isn't Jesus Gone?!** If you believe what the Bible says, then Jesus is gone and has been gone for ages

already. Honestly though, that probably makes a lot of things line up, doesn't it. Just look at the world around us – does it look like a world with a Jesus in it?! Wars and fighting, famine and plague, countless diseases, economic devastation, abuse, addiction, mutilation of human sexuality, rampant paganism, endless sin against God and his Word, and it never stops until our lifeless bodies are dropped six feet into the ground and covered with dirt. In a world like this one, it might not take much to convince us that Jesus is gone. So if the Bible says he ascended and returned to heaven, that's fine by us because it's pretty clear he isn't here anymore!

**So why are YOU still here?** What are you doing spending your time hanging out at a church, listening to an old-fashioned, outdated book? Doesn't that seem wasteful? Isn't there something better you could be doing with your time? Why bother listening to the Word of a Lord who doesn't seem to care very much about this world or its people anymore? Why put so much effort into lining up our thoughts, words, and actions with a set of laws and commands that don't seem to fit society anymore? **Why follow a Jesus who is gone?**

If you've asked yourself that question before, you're far from alone. As the cancer races through your body and you have limited days to live, you wonder where Jesus is. You walk in on your best friend slumped on the floor again in an addiction-induced stupor, just praying they're alive. Your spouse suddenly leaves you and you're more alone than you've ever been before, feeling as if both your spouse and God himself have moved on to other people. Or maybe you're simply a faithful follower of the God of the Scriptures and all you can do these days is wring your hands with stress and anxiety as you wonder how on God's green earth we ended up like this.

In those deepest darkest moments of life (whether I specifically listed yours or not, we all have them!), it very quickly becomes apparent to us that we can't handle this alone; we need Jesus. We feel like those disciples, just standing there staring into the clouds, hoping and praying for a God who cares enough to help us. And just like he did for his disciples on the first Ascension Day, God uses today to remind us of three very important things: a promise, a plan, and a purpose.

First, the promise. In Matthew 28:20, the Holy God make an unbreakable promise to his people: *“Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”* Did you catch that? Please make sure you don't miss it! These words are so familiar they probably roll right off our tongues without much thought, but they're critically important to our discussion today! God PROMISES “I AM WITH YOU ALWAYS!!”

That means **Jesus Isn't Gone!** And it doesn't matter what the world looks like, because the world doesn't have the power to stop Jesus. And while they are certainly significant to us in the moment, the things happening in our own lives don't matter because our thoughts and our feelings and even our worst days cannot take away or negate the love of the Jesus who is WITH US. And it doesn't matter what Satan or our own sinful hearts try to convince us of because sin and Satan have already lost the fight – Jesus the Victorious Christ conquered them forever. He passed through death and came out the other side as the clear winner, with

death robbed of all its power. If Jesus stands victorious over sin, Satan, and even death, then surely we can trust that when he speaks, it is 100% truth. A God with that much power and authority is a God who is worthy of our trust, because he uses all that power and authority for our eternal good. So if he says he is with us, then he is. And if he is with us, then we have nothing to fear.

That leads us to his plan. In our reading from Acts 1 today, the angels tell Jesus' disciples, "*This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.*" It's true that we don't see Jesus physically walking around on earth right now, because at this time, Jesus is still the Ascended Lord. But "ascended" does not equal "absent." God is a spirit, so he is invisible unless he takes on a physical form. But God is also omnipresent, one of the three fancy "omni" words we use to describe amazing real truths about God. "Omnipresent" means that God is constantly present in every single place that exists. No ifs, ands, or buts about it – God is everywhere always. So is Jesus in heaven? Yes. But is Jesus also here? Yes! And if Jesus is here, does he see and know and care about what is happening in our world and in our lives? Yes, absolutely! The sentiment "gone but not forgotten" doesn't apply to Jesus. Our Ascended Lord is gone (in a certain way and for a time), but also never gone!

And the angels shared the beautiful comfort that, at the perfect time when God has decided, the same Jesus we've always known and loved will come back in the same way he left, returning to reunite the bodies and souls of all his people to bring our complete beings to our eternal home with him. On that Last Day when Jesus comes again, no one will miss it; not one of Jesus' followers will be left behind. He will come again to bring us to heaven where there will never be any crying or mourning or sickness or suffering or pain or problems we face in this world, not even one single sin! Everything will be perfect!!

As much as we God's people all long for that glorious day, we have a purpose in the meantime. In Acts 1 again, Jesus clearly says about that day, "*It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.*" So in the meantime he says, "*You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth.*" And in Matthew 28, he adds, "*Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.*"

The glorious Last Day hasn't come yet, which means there is work to be done! We have been given a priceless privilege from Jesus – being part of the mission of spreading the good news of the Gospel to people all around the world. For most of us that probably doesn't mean hopping on a plane and flying overseas to share the good news of Jesus in another language. For us, maybe our mission is simply to share Jesus with the lady who lives next door, the cousin we haven't talked to in years, or the co-worker we eat lunch with every day. Because Jesus isn't satisfied with billions of priceless eternal souls on the fast-track to hell. And Jesus isn't satisfied with the Christian Church the size that it is. Please don't misunderstand – Jesus isn't angry about the Church being "too small"; no, Jesus

simply wants us all to know and remember that his Church forever has room for one more. We never have to wait for someone to leave the Church before another person can enter; and no matter how many people join, we never run out of room. There is always room for one more.

So Jesus calls upon his disciples of every generation and joins us to this vital mission. Next Sunday we get to celebrate the Festival of Pentecost when God the Holy Spirit is poured out on his Church, enabling his Word to powerfully spread around the world. Regardless of where we are, how old we are, and how many people we know, Jesus says to every one of us: “*Go – be my witnesses!*” We have heard and seen all the wonderful things God has done for us, written on page after page of Holy Scripture. The Holy Spirit gives us faith, convincing us that our God speaks the truth and that by Jesus’ perfect life, death, and resurrection, we have the free and full forgiveness of all our sins, peace with God, and an inheritance in heaven that shall never perish, spoil, or fade. Now we get to tell someone else that this same Jesus – ascended, but not absent! – did all the same things for them too.

We can be confident that God blesses that work. He certainly blessed the work of those early disciples! After all, **you’re still here!** The fact that any of us are here at all means two things: someone shared the Word of God with us, and God blessed that work. Jesus blesses his Church with his Word and sacraments and with a mission that continues for the rest of our time on earth.

After hearing the reminder from the angels, the disciples knew exactly what to do as children and followers of such a gracious God – in Luke 24 we’re told, *They worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.* Dear disciples of Jesus, God has not changed his promise, his plan, or his purpose for us; therefore we can confidently say (completely regardless of everything happening in the world and in our lives), **Jesus Isn’t Gone!** He reigns in heaven as the victorious King, ruling over all things for the eternal good of his people, and he goes with us through every moment of every day. All we need to do to see the proof of that is look around us – by the grace of God, **We’re Still Here!** – here gathered around his Word for the strengthening of our faith, and here with people on earth for at least one more day as part of the mission to spread near and far the good news of Jesus. Through it all, no matter what, *surely he is with us always, to the very end of the age.* (Mt. 28) All praise and thanks and honor and glory to our risen and ascended Jesus forever and ever. Amen!

And the peace of God which goes beyond all understanding will guard and keep our hearts and our minds through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.