

LIVING IN ANTICIPATION

Sermon given by Dan Phillips

At Caroline Valley Community Church

June 5, 2011

7th Sunday of Easter 2011

Acts 1:6-14

⁶So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?"
⁷He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority.
⁸But 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." ⁹And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, ¹¹and 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." ¹²Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. ¹³And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying, Peter and John and Ja*mes and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James. ¹⁴All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.

We continue in the Easter season, with a theme of LIVING. We are alive because of the resurrection of Jesus. As we proclaim that he is alive indeed, we claim our own lives. And we are exploring what it means to live in Christ, to be alive because of our relationship with Jesus. We talked about what it means to be alive, what defines life: movement, growth, reproduction, etc. And we talked about what that means in the Christian context.

We spoke one week about the idea of living in hope. That is, the idea of the Christian existence as one of living with the expectation and desire that things will get better. We talked another week about living in reverence and awe: being the people of God. One service we spoke of living in love, and how the perfect love that Jesus modeled is necessary, but difficult, for us. And last week we spoke of living in solidarity, in close interaction and support, with each other, but not with the culture of this world. This week we will discuss the idea of living in anticipation, of living while looking for something to happen.

Our text is the Ascension text in Acts. The only other account of the Ascension was also written by Luke, in his gospel. Luke uses the accounts of the Ascension as a transition from his gospel of Luke to his book concerning the Acts of the Apostles. And this is a transition for Christians from a time when Jesus is present with the believers to the time when the believers no longer have his physical presence.

The passage begins with the disciples asking Jesus a question. Basically they were asking what would happen next. Would Jesus begin his rule now? He had risen from the dead! Surely everyone would believe now! And what better credentials for a leader: to be someone who could not be killed. Besides, they could not imagine what came next in this story of God and man.

Then, after telling them not to worry about things that properly belonged to God, Jesus told them what their future was. They were to become powerful through the coming of the Holy Spirit. And they were to use that power to tell everyone the Good News. Just after he said this, he began to levitate, to rise upward, until he entered the clouds.

I think that I, like the disciples, would have stared upward when Jesus left in so strange a manner. It was surely an astounding sight, to see a man rise up from the ground and lift right on up into the clouds. I suspect that most of us would have stared at this for a while. Some of us would have said "Whoa, what is this?" Others would have said "How cool is that!" But all of us would have been wondering if he would come right back, or what we would do if he did not come right back. So we looked upward for a time.

When the disciples did stop looking up, and looked around them, they saw two men dressed in white. Surely these were angels, not men! But the word for angel in greek means messenger, so even a human who is God's messenger is an angel. So both men and angels, these beings dressed in white spoke to the disciples.

They asked the disciples a question that resounds with us today. Why, they said, are you staring up into heaven? Jesus will return the same way he left. And without giving an answer that is recorded, the disciples return to Jerusalem. There in Jerusalem they pray and worship together, in unity of heart and purpose. And it was not just the disciples, but all of Jesus' followers, including many women.

And they still did not know what was going to happen! Like us today, they were learning to live waiting for God to move. They did, however, do the things that put us into a state where we are ready to hear God's instructions and see God's hand in the things that happen.

So what do we anticipate today? Many people are still asking what will happen next. They want to know dates and times. Today they work to predict when Jesus will return. We have seen some recently who thought they had that all figured out. Never mind that it is God's to handle and decide, they thought they were as smart as God. So they made predictions. And they were wrong. Such people have always been wrong, and always will be wrong!

And there are many who are still staring up into the heavens. They have no concern for what happens here on this earth. They are waiting for Jesus, but waiting in a way not prescribed by Jesus. Jesus did not tell us to ignore the world. He told us to evangelize the world.

And how do we do that? This much the disciples understood and followed. First, they worshipped together and prayed together and shared together. They understood the value of worship, and prayer, and unity. Do we? Where is our joint worship? Where is our prayer? Where is our unity?

Then, they waited on God. Where is our waiting? We are often in a hurry to do God's work, even before we know what it is.

They were inclusive. Unlike most of the New Testament, the women are mentioned, specifically mentioned. It is clear that this will be a new time for those who follow Jesus.

What, then, do we anticipate as we worship and pray? Do we wait for the divine Spirit to move us? Are we ready to witness to the Good News? Or are we still staring at the heavens?