

Seventh Sunday of Easter

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

FOLLOWING IN JESUS' FOOTSTEPS

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I wrote this sermon on Thursday, May 21 which on the church liturgical calendar is designated Ascension of the Lord. If you count backwards from Ascension Day to April 12, Easter Sunday, you get 40 days. If you count forward from Ascension Day to next Sunday, May 31, you get 10 days. Obviously, that gives you a total of 50 days when you reach the Day of Pentecost a week from today. [Pentecost is a Greek word that means 50, and we'll hear that story from Acts 2 next Sunday.]

The Ascension of the Lord Day, coming as it does on a Thursday and sandwiched between Easter and Pentecost, doesn't get much attention in the Church, at least not in the Western Protestant Church. And that's a shame, because the resurrection and the ascension go together and express fully the power and glory of our risen Lord Jesus.

After he was raised from the dead, Jesus (as Luke tells us) "presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God." (Acts 1:3) At the end of those forty days, Jesus told his disciples to go back to Jerusalem and wait there for "the promise of the Father" (which, as we will find out next Sunday, was the Holy Spirit).

Jesus' departure from his disciples as he left them behind here on earth is reminiscent of other strange and wonderful Bible stories:

- In the Old Testament, as Elijah and Elisha "continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven." (2 Kings 2:11)
- In the gospels, Jesus took Peter, James, and John up on the mountain with him "and he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white . . . and a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him." (Mark 9:2-8)
- Also in the gospels, when the women went to the tomb on Sunday morning, "suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them and "said to them, 'Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.'" (Luke 24:4-5)

In other words, today's story about Jesus being lifted up in a cloud that took him out of the disciples' sight is in good company with the stories about God's people encountering God's majesty and glory and power, surrounded by mystery.

Since it's so hard to describe the reality and experience of encountering the living God, how shall we understand the meaning of this mysterious story for our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ? This morning I would like to do something different in my sermon. As I was reading and studying for this sermon, two ideas kept rolling around in my head. The first is the word "vignette," which means "a brief, evocative

description, account, or episode.” The second is the well-known phrase, “to follow in one’s footsteps.” A helpful description of that phrase is “to pursue something that someone (often a family member) has already done.” Since Christ is our family member or, more correctly, we are his family member, I want to share a series of vignettes about “following in Jesus’ footsteps.”

Vignette #1: Footprints in the Sand

You may well be familiar with the poem about the man who dreamed he was walking with the Lord on the beach. As they walked, the man saw scenes from his life flash before his eyes. He noticed two sets of footprints in the sand. However, as he looked back, he noticed only one set of footprints in the sand, always in the lowest and hardest times in his life. Bothered by this, the man asked the Lord why, when he had promised to be with him always, the Lord would abandon him in his greatest time of need. The Lord replied, “My precious, precious child. I love you, and I would never, never leave you during your times of trial and suffering. When you saw only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you.”

That may be how most of us think about the footsteps of Jesus. While that is a comforting story, there’s another way to think about the footsteps of Jesus – and that is, following in Jesus’ footsteps.

Vignette #2: James Tissot’s painting “The Ascension”

James Tissot was a 19th century French painter who gained fame for his paintings of elegantly dressed women in high society scenes. At the age of 49, however, he experienced a revival of his Catholic faith and began to paint scenes from the Bible. He even traveled to the Holy Land so he could visit the places where the Bible stories took place.

Many artists have painted scenes of Jesus’ ascension into heaven. Tissot’s painting that you are looking at is similar in many ways, the most striking of which is the great crowd of people standing and looking up into heaven at the ascending Jesus. However, there is one noticeable and significant difference between Tissot’s painting and many others. If you can tear your eyes away from the glory of the ascending Jesus, look at the bottom of the painting. There you will see the imprint of Jesus’ feet. In a description of the painting from the Brooklyn Museum where it is displayed, “Christ’s two footprints remain pressed into the earth as proof of his presence on earth and in heaven . . . and as a reminder that he walked among [people].”¹



My favorite part of this ascension story is v. 11, where the two men dressed in white say to the disciples (who must have been standing there gawking, with their mouths hanging open), “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” Imagine the two men saying to the disciples, “Look down and see his footprints. You’ve got work to do, and you’re going to following Jesus’ footsteps.”

Vignette #3: The Church of Domine Quo Vadis (also known as Church of Saint Mary in Palmis)

Outside of Rome, Italy there is a small and ancient church, really nothing more than a chapel. There has been a church on the site since the 9th century A.D., but the current church dates from the mid-17th century.

At the center of the church is a marble slab with what are revered as the impressions of Jesus’ feet (although that slab is a replica of the original which is housed in a nearby basilica). The name of the Church is La Chiesa del Domine Quo Vadis.

There are many 1st century A.D. Christian writings that, for many reasons, were not included in the canon of the New Testament. One of them is called Acts of Peter. In that writing is a story about the Apostle Peter fleeing for his life from Rome around the year 64 A.D. According to the story, after Peter made it out of the city and was walking on the Appian Way, he met the risen Lord who was headed toward the city. Peter asked, “Lord, where are you going?” (which is how “Domine quo vadis” is translated). Christ told his disciple, “I am going to Rome to be crucified again.” According to tradition, upon meeting and hearing his Lord, Peter found his courage, returned to Rome (following in Jesus’ footsteps, if you will), continued his ministry, and eventually was martyred for his faith by being crucified.²

Interestingly, in one of the New Testament letters that bears Peter’s name, he considers the example of Christ’s suffering and writes, “For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.” (1 Peter 2:21)

Vignette #4: Reflections on Jesus' Footsteps

Great Christian witnesses have offered their reflections, not only on Jesus' footsteps, but more important, on our calling to follow in our Lord's footsteps to continue his work here on earth.

St. Augustine, the 4th century bishop of North Africa, was quoted by Rev. Desmond Tutu, the 20th century Archbishop of Cape Town in South Africa, when he said, "Without God, we cannot. Without us, God will not."

Teresa of Avila was a 16th century Spanish noblewoman who felt called to a life of Christian service as a nun. She was influential in helping establish and strengthen the Carmelite tradition during the Catholic Reformation. Four centuries after her death, she was declared a Doctor of the Church. Teresa wrote this about what it means for us to follow in Jesus' footsteps: "Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours."

And the 20th century German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was martyred by the Nazis, wrote, "The body of Christ takes up space on earth. That is the Body of Christ makes footprints. A truth, a doctrine, or a religion need no space for themselves. They are disembodied entities, that is all. But the incarnate Christ needs not only ears or hearts, but living people who will follow him."

Vignette #5: Neil Armstrong

Our own Bill Butler has made two trips to the Holy Land. When he found out my sermon topic for today, he sent me a devotion he had received from his pastor in Baltimore who was on the trips. When Astronaut Neil Armstrong died in 2012, Rev. Roberts sent this memory to the group members: "Friends, the death of Neil Armstrong prompts the following reflection. When visiting Jerusalem Neil Armstrong asked to see an authentic site, a place where Jesus walked for sure, not a 'traditional' holy place. The archaeologist hosting Armstrong, Meir Ben-Dov, took him to the grand ceremonial stair case that had been recently excavated on the south side of the Temple Mount. The steps were the main entrance to the Temple. Jesus for sure had walked on them and stood there to teach. When assured that he was standing where Jesus had indeed stood, Armstrong said that it was a greater thrill for him than walking on the moon.

"Every material object Jesus mentions in the Matthew 23 was (and many still are) visible from those steps, or just around the corner or over the shoulder of a someone standing on those steps -- Moses' seat, the Temple, mikvaot for purification, white washed tombs on the Mt. of Olives, hell (Hinnon Valley), and 'Zechariah's' Tomb. I am sure the author of Matthew meant for us to picture Jesus teaching from these steps to the people on the plaza below, a place in old Jerusalem rather like Speaker's Corner at Hyde Park in London. So, when you hear, 'That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind' and when you see the picture of Neil Armstrong's footprint on the moon, remember those steps in Jerusalem that knew the footsteps of Jesus, the steps that gave Neil Armstrong his greatest thrill."

Vignette #7: Johnny Cash “No Earthly Good”

Finally, as we think about those disciples gawking and gaping as they looked up to heaven and the two white-robed men asking, “Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” the saying “Don’t be so heavenly minded that you’re no earthly good” comes to mind. And, so, I leave you with the words of Johnny Cash, who wrote and sang:

*Come hear me good brothers come here one and all
Don't brag about standing or you'll surely fall
You're shinin' your light yes and shine it you should
You're so heavenly minded and you're no earthly good*

*Come hear me good sisters you're salt of the earth
If your salt isn't salted then what is it worth
You could give someone a cool drink if you would
You're so heavenly minded and you're no earthly good*

*The gospel ain't gospel until it is spread
But how can you share it where you've got your head
There's hands that reach out for a hand if you would
You're shinin' your light right and shine it you should
But you're so heavenly minded you're no earthly good*

*If you're holdin' heaven then spread it around
There are hungry hands reaching up here from the ground
Move over and share the high ground where you stood
So heavenly minded and you're no earthly good
Move over and share the high ground where you stood
So heavenly minded and you're no earthly good*

In other words, fellow Christians and the Wallace Presbyterian Church, how will we follow in Jesus’ steps and be and do some earthly good as we worship and serve our heavenly Lord?

Let us pray: Generous God, knowing that there is no end to your goodness, we pray to do your will, no matter where it takes us or what it requires of us. You give us the power of the Holy Spirit to be your witnesses to the ends of the earth. Free us from whatever prevents us from being welcoming, generous, and loving. Make us one in our service to our Savior Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

NOTES

¹James Tissot, “The Ascension (L’Ascension),” at www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/13530

²Billy Ryan, “Are These the Actual Footprints of Jesus Christ?” June 27, 2018 at www.ucatholic.com.