

Easter 6 B 2018

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

May 9, 2018

John 15:9-17

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

The evangelist Luke says that Jesus rose from the dead at Easter and spent the next forty day days appearing to his followers and explaining to them how his crucifixion and resurrection were part of the life of God that they knew from the Old Testament. And according to Luke, on the fortieth day, Jesus ascended into heaven. And on the fiftieth day– the Jewish holy day of Pentecost– Jesus sent the Holy Spirit.

So because of Luke's outline of the events, churches like Dove of Peace spend 50 days in the season of Easter, traveling from the empty tomb on Easter morning to Pentecost on the fiftieth day. And Ascension– the fortieth day– necessarily falls on a Thursday every year. And we usually move it to Sunday, the 43rd day, rather than the 40th day.

This is all Luke's doing. The words over our pulpit come from Ascension Day according to Luke. When Jesus hands over his ministry to his followers. Jesus will no longer be in the world. But they will be.

The building where you sit this morning is a monument to Ascension and Pentecost. With Ascension over the pulpit, and with the descending dove– the Holy Spirit– coming down upon the community. This sanctuary memorializes the moment that the Resurrection of Jesus Christ becomes the Church. To summon you and me back to basics each time we worship here.

It may surprise you, then, that last Sunday and today our gospel readings are from the Last Supper. The Last Supper according to John. John, when he wrote his gospel, apparently did not get the memo from Luke about how Easter is supposed to last fifty days. And for John and his readers, the crucifixion, the resurrection, and the ascension are all a single reality. A single spiritual truth. An integrated message. During Lent I preached a sermon which said, "You know John 3:16. But do you know John 3:14?" Do any of you remember that sermon? John 3:14 says, *Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.* The key there is that the "lifting up" of the Son of Man– which is in John's gospel, and we heard it twice during Lent– the "lifting up" of Jesus refers to his crucifixion AND resurrection AND ascension.

So for John, there is not a space and a place between the resurrection and the ascension in which Jesus does all of this teaching and [point to the pulpit] giving instructions and sending the Holy

Spirit. Instead Jesus does those things beforehand, before his crucifixion, before “the lifting up of the Son of Man.” In a number of places. But in particular at the Last Supper. This whole section of John’s Gospel, this body of teaching by Jesus, is usually called by scholars, the “*Farewell Discourse*.” Jesus is saying good-bye and is reviewing all of the important things.

And that’s where today’s gospel reading comes from. It follows last Sunday’s gospel reading. Which you may remember was, “I am the vine. You are the branches.” There are seven famous “I am” metaphors in John’s gospel Number one. I am the bread of life. Number two. I am the light of the world. Number three. I am the gate. Number four. I am the good shepherd. Number five. I am the resurrection and the life. Number six. I am the way and the truth and the life. And finally number seven. I am the vine; you are the branches. That was last Sunday’s gospel, and today we have the next nine verses that directly follow. That explain in greater detail the relationship of the vine and the branches. Today again Jesus speaks of our bearing fruit. “Fruit that will last,” Jesus says.

Of those seven great “I am” statements that have been turned into songs and stained glass images and poems and books— of those seven great “I am” statements, only this last one contains a “you.” I suppose if Jesus is the Good Shepherd, then it is implied that we are the sheep. I suppose if Jesus is the Bread of Life, then it is implied that we are those who hunger for that bread. But in this last and perhaps most important of the “I am” statements, there is a “you.” I am the vine. You are the branches. It’s a very specific image from grapes and wine-making. Jesus could have said that he is the vine, and we are the fruit. But he didn’t. He could have said that he is the roots, and we are the vine. But he didn’t. He could have used the great symbol of the Tree of Life. But he didn’t. It’s a very specific horticultural image in which we play a secondary role. As branches in relation to the vine. But we bear fruit. We are not the fruit ourselves. We bear the fruit. And Jesus is the vine. He does not bear fruit. He supports and sustains the branches— us— and we bear the fruit.

This whole part of the Farewell Discourse is extravagantly important to Lutherans because it illustrates the relationship between faith and works. Fruit means works. Works of love. But we bear fruit because we abide in Jesus, as branches grafted onto his vine. Last week’s gospel said, “Apart from me you can do nothing.” Big words for Lutherans. And today’s gospel, the next nine verses after last week, says, “*You did not choose me but I chose you.*” More big words for Lutherans. Many religious pathways exist that essentially tell you to bear fruit, and if you bear enough fruit, and good fruit, you might get annexed into the garden. It all starts with you. It all depends on you. But the Lutheran religious pathway is about being annexed onto the vine, and then beginning to bear fruit as a result of that *abiding*— that relationship— we have with God through faith and grace.

So here we are at the end of the Easter season. And the great changing of the guard. The great transformation of Jesus from an earthly figure to a heavenly figure. And the corresponding change in us. From being individuals whom Jesus has gathered into a Church whom he has commissioned.

The very last sentence of Matthew's gospel is something we call the Great Commission. *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.* Over our pulpit is the Great Commission from Luke, which takes place in the opening sentences of the Acts of the Apostles: *You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.* To the ends of the earth! All nations! There is very much a task of evangelization for the Church as Luke and Matthew observe the transformation of Jesus to his throne in heaven.

Today's gospel reading is in some ways the Great Commission according to John. From the Farewell Discourse. *Abide in my love.* Matthew and Luke see the Church spreading out across the globe. Yet, Jesus also says, stay connected. Stay in me. Stay attached to the vine. *"I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last."* Do works of love. That's the fruit that lasts. As Paul says, it bears all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Our denomination is called the *Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*. There is an ongoing discussion about the word *evangelical*. Because of what that word now means in our culture. It means things, in fact, in the popular imagination, that are the exact opposite of who we are and what we teach. We mean *evangelical* in the original Greek. Which would be great if Americans all knew Greek.

In any event, the Farewell Discourse of John provides an alternate view of what it means to be the church, and how the church will transform the world after the ascension of Jesus into heaven. It's an organic image. I am the vine, you are the branches. I am. You are. I am. You are. Love one another as I have loved you. Rather than bearing a message, the Church is a relationship. Rather than proclaiming words the Church bears fruits that will last. Rather than moving out in all directions the Church abides as more branches are added and some branches are pruned.

Our sanctuary architecture seeks to capture that great moment when Jesus *ascends* and the Spirit *descends*. Today's gospel is another reflection on that moment. Another message for the church. *"As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love."* Do unto others as I have done unto you. I am the vine. You are the branches. I am. You are. I am. You are. Amen.