

**Series: Joy in the Journey**

**Today: The Ascension**

**Text: Acts 1:6-14**

**A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.**

**Sunday, May 9, 2010**

**First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA**

I want to take a moment as I begin to acknowledge that today is special in three different ways. It is Mother's day, and later in the service we will say a word of thanks to those of you who are raising children or who have nurtured the faith of your children who are now grown.

It is also a day when we honor members of our church who have reached a milestone in your lives of being members of this church for 50 years. Fully 10% of our membership is in that category. In addition many of you have moved from other parts of the country who would have been a member of the church from which you transferred your membership for 50 years or more. We have a significant number of people in this church who are stable citizens in the Kingdom of God, and that brings stability to our ministry that younger churches do not experience. You help us to understand that the success of our ministry comes from never saying the seven last words of the church: "*We have never done it that way before.*" Instead, success comes when we pay attention to the leading of God and meet people at the point of their need with the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ.

First Presbyterian Church is 268 years old this month, and it is still a healthy, vibrant place to worship and serve because it has never stopped changing. In the two or three generations that span the years of your membership, you have seen the church's ministry reach out in different and varied ways that have attracted new people. As we make decisions about our future, rest assured we will be listening and learning from the past as to how you have been able to change to meet the needs of people in the past.

I am reminded of a story of a wise old Mother Superior who was dying. The nuns gathered around her bed. She asked for a little warm milk to sip. A nun went to the kitchen to warm some milk. Remembering a bottle of whiskey received as a gift the previous Christmas, she opened it and poured a generous amount into the warm milk. Mother drank a little, then a little more, and then before they knew it, she had drunk the whole glass down to the last drop.

"Mother, Mother" the nuns cried, "Give us some wisdom before you die!" She raised herself up in bed with a pious look on her face and pointing out the window, she said, "Don't sell that cow!"

The third thing that makes this day important is that this is the Sunday before Ascension Day. If you take a drive through Amish country this coming Thursday, you will probably not see the Amish plowing and planting in their fields as you usually do on a weekday in the spring. What you will likely see lots of horse and buggies with people visiting their neighbors. According to Amish historian, Donald Kraybill, "*Ascension Day is a holiday for visiting, fishing, and other forms of recreation.*" ([www.everyculture.com](http://www.everyculture.com))

In both Amish and Mennonite traditions, Ascension Day, which comes forty days after Easter, is a major holiday. It is listed on our Presbyterian calendar as an important day, but because it falls on a Thursday, it often goes unnoticed. This morning I want us to focus on the text where the ascension is mentioned in scripture and see it as a very important day for us if we truly believe that the church is called to be the body of Christ in this world.

What I am about to share with you is unthinkable for someone trained in three point sermons. I want to focus on just one point and one point only. The point is this: there is a difference between the way God marks time and the way we mark time; and that difference gives us a new way of understanding our responsibilities as the body of Christ.

### **God's Time and Our Time**

Our text this morning is from the first chapter of Acts. It is really a continuation of Luke's Gospel. It is written by the same author in the same style with the same attention to detail

that you would expect from a physician. The difference is that in Luke they were dealing with Jesus in human form. In Acts they are talking to the risen Lord.

The disciples have a question for Jesus. It has to do with the way they tell time. They want to know when their suffering will come to an end. They want to know when it will be their turn to take seats of power in the Kingdom of God. They were Jews. Their Hebrew Bible promised them that they were the chosen people to establish the Kingdom of God on the earth.

They had been given a land where they were to establish a theocracy; a temporal government ruled by the will of God. King David had shown it could be done, but it has been a long time since David. Their land is once again occupied by a foreign power, and their only hope is that God will intervene.

They had pinned their hopes on Jesus as the Messiah; the Chosen One who would finally establish the Kingdom of God on the earth. Their hopes were dashed when he was crucified, but now he is alive. Now they dared to hope AGAIN!! “*Lord, is this the time you will restore the Kingdom?*”

Jesus surprises him with his answer. He tells them that the time for God to intervene is not their business. It is God’s business. What God does, the way in which he does it, and the timing he uses to get things done are not to be their concern. Their job is to witness to the power of God in their lives! They were to give their testimony that the power of God is on the side of life, not death; on the side of hope, not despair. They were to be witnesses to the power of God.

A look at the language in which the Bible is written will give us a clue. When the disciples ask Jesus if this is the *time*, the Greek word they use is *chronos*. Chronos is time that is measured by a clock or a calendar. It is the 60 seconds in a minute, 60 minutes in an hour, 24 hours in a day, seven days in a week, and the 52 weeks in a year. Chronos is the way we measure time.

Jesus answers and says “It is not for you to know the *times*....” The Greek word is *kairos*. *Kairos* doesn’t keep time by hours, days, weeks and years. *Kairos* is the appointed time when

God intervenes in human history to shape it by God's design. When God delivered the Israelites from bondage in Egypt, it was the right *kairos*. When God allowed David to slay Goliath and become the King of Israel, it was the right *kairos*. When God came to us in the form of the child Jesus, it was the right *kairos*.

In my own life I have seen things that I never thought would happen; not in my lifetime. I have seen the breakup of the Soviet Union which I was taught was the evil empire that wanted to bury us in the United States of America. I have seen the election of an African American President. By the way humans measure time, most of us were fairly confident we would never see that happen, but what we didn't see is what God was doing behind the scenes to bring about a history on the side of justice for all people. This is the *kairos* of God.

Human beings want to know when something is going to happen: *What is the chronos of the event?* God is not so much interested in the when as he is the significance of what will happen: *How will this event change the course of the lives of God's people? What is the kairos of the event?*

I found a story the other day written by an Evelyn Bence; a woman who had spent an evening serving the homeless in a winter shelter program much like the one we hosted here in March. That experience was a *kairos* moment for her. Listen to what she wrote:

"Homeless." As I did the dishes, still within sight of the women, the word took on a personal meaning. These women slept here, but every morning when they left, they had to carry their possessions with them.

Suddenly I was overwhelmed with gratitude for my nightgowns, for my very own pillow, for my hand-picked dining room chairs. "Lord," I silently prayed, "thank you. Thank you—that I'm not one of them."

The Director of the shelter met me in the hallway and interrupted my pharisaical thoughts with her own gratitude for my help. I asked her about certain women who had caught my attention.

It turns out Routy Rachel had a Ph.D. in art history. Gradually her mind had slipped out of her own grasp. Esther, who had talked to herself all evening, was the mother of five children. She was a Midwestern farmer's wife—until her life crumbled around her. Christy didn't know much about Carol, who had lain on her back for more than an hour, reading her King James Bible. Marla, who had seemed sullen, was a trained soprano who occasionally enjoyed serenading the rest of the group.

Since my evening at the shelter, I have been more aware of the uprooted Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Latin American refugees who live in my neighborhood, who ride my bus. War, political change, economic collapse—conditions over which they had no control—destroyed their lifestyle and stole their ability to communicate easily and thus to work efficiently. My thoughts have frightened me. My comfortable world, my secure home, is not guaranteed.

The difference between "Thank you that I'm not one of them" and "Thank you for the grace you have shown to me, and help me to mirror your grace to others" may, at first, seem slight. But the second is for me a wholly new mindset that makes me want to reach out, that reduces my discomfort around those who have less than I, and, surprisingly, that reduces my fear of a future that is unknown. Why? Because even though I know I have no insurance policy against war and famine or sickness, I know I have a God who does not forget his own. And for that I thank him also. [Source: *Evelyn Bence, "Two Kinds of Thanks," Christianity Today magazine (November, 1999)*]

### **Conclusion**

It was only a mission project of her church scheduled for a certain week during the year. It was only three hours out of her life. This was the *chronos* of the event. However, in the midst of that *chronos* moment God intervened and made it a *kairos* event. It changed her life. It changed the lives of others whom she touched because she realized in that moment that she was the same as the women of the shelter who deserved more from her and from her church than she was aware she could offer.

So my question for those of us here this morning is this: Are you willing to allow God to use the *chronos* moments in your lives to become *kairos* events? Where is God calling you to serve?

The Ascension of Jesus means that he is no longer with us in the flesh. It is now up to us to become his body in the world.