

Preached by Dr. Carl A. Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, VA 22310
June 5, 2011
ASCENSION SUNDAY

Acts 1:6–14

ACTIVE MYSTERIES

This is one of those special Sundays in the year that if you missed church, you might not even know it happened. It's a unique event in the life of Christ which we lift up in worship. The same way we worship in a special way at Christmas to celebrate Christ's birth, or the same way we gathered on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday to celebrate the sacrifice of his death. It's just as important as Easter to remember the day of Christ's ascension—the day that his resurrection became of benefit for all of us.

Ascension Sunday: 40 days after Easter. In ten more days from last Thursday, it will be Pentecost. All the numerology, the significance, is lost on us till we hark back and think of the 40 years they wandered in the wilderness. 40 days, Jesus stranded in the desert. All significant life-changing events, for those who would be faithful 40 days from Easter. Again we remember ... he suffered under Pontius Pilate, he was crucified dead, and buried, he descended into hell. On the third day he was raised from the dead, he ascended into heaven.

The ascension is that moment when all of the mysteries fade—of the incarnation of our believing that which we cannot prove. They all become active mysteries. Our heavenly father is working on our behalf. Not that long after the early church was formed, not that many years speaking in a relative sense, Augustine came along. Here's what he said about the ascension: "Unless the Savior has ascended into heaven, his nativity would have come to nothing. Unless the Savior has ascended into heaven, his passion (meaning his death) would have borne no fruit for us and his most holy resurrection would have been useless to anyone but himself." If Jesus was raised from the dead—and we know He is—that only has meaning for us when he returns to heaven and takes up his role in the godhead—his obligation not only to be human but to remain divine.

We celebrate the ascension on this Sunday because it's the closest Sunday to the 40 day event. If you are quick with math, you know that 40 days from Easter was last Thursday. This is the closest day we have when gather to worship, when we say that Christ not only died for us but that he descended into hell to experience the limits of human suffering, that he was resurrected, and that He also ascended to heaven. Two extremes: the experience of the loneliness of hell and the feeling of abandonment, and then the homecoming of our Savior. All that we say about them, all that we believe, re-defines us. More active mysteries. I can't explain the incarnation. I can't explain what it means for someone who is God and human to be crucified, dead, and buried. I can't explain a resurrection from the dead; not that he came back to life from a coma, but a true death. That he is raised up by his heavenly father. I can't even explain what will

happen in another six or seven days when we celebrate Pentecost and the Holy Spirit infuses not only our hearts but the Holy Spirit takes charge of every aspect of our lives.

Augustine later said that “Jesus leaves earth not to escape it but to reign over it.” Now, if we were worshipping in another part of the world, if we had been born to different parents, if western culture meant less to us because we were born far away in an eastern Orthodox country, we would likely be in a sanctuary where looking up, we wouldn’t see spotlights and beautiful pine wood, but a mosaic—a visual depiction of Christ looking down on us, becoming personally involved in every generation that worships him in every place on earth. But we are here. And we can only live in our experience of God’s love—of Christ in our midst.

Yes, the birthday of the church is next Sunday: the Pentecost event. I hope you saw in your bulletin an announcement and a request that as many people as possible wear red on Pentecost—wear red to symbolize the fire and the power of God’s spirit. I know that not all of you men have a red sports coat, so a red tie will suffice.

The Holy Spirit takes a world that is divided by languages, by our ethnic origins, and it reunites it. The Holy Spirit brings healing to a world that suffers from far too many divisions. Yes, it’s a concept that may be lost on young minds, but I still remember the day my daughter came and got me to come outside and watch her perform the Double Dutch Treat—jumping rope to two different ropes rotating in opposite directions. Kierkegaard wrote, “We can only be contemporary where we live. But through our becoming one with Christ we can also participate in God’s eternal history.”

Where we are on earth now and what has been and will be in the future by God’s providence—when we are willing to see something greater than we have imagined, we will move from Ascension to Pentecost. Isn’t it wonderful that even in the ascension there are very detailed instructions for the followers of Jesus: Go back and pray. Wait and pray. Don’t be so concerned about doing, but be in prayer.

Jesus was going away from their sight so he could return to their hearts. He departed, but behold he is here now with us. Just as his disciples saw a risen Christ ascend into heaven, we can see the Church growing, learning obedience and faithfulness. Not choosing what we would ask, but what God has planned.

Did you hear the verse that Monica Curry read—the very first verse of our lesson today? They wanted to know: So, Lord, is this the time you will restore the kingdom? After all this time, that’s all they can think about. So, now, do we get what we wanted? Now, will you do what we expected you to do—restore all the ways of doing faith, put us back in power, restore our former glory? If we were standing in Jesus’ presence, and we are, what would we ask that would be just as irrelevant to the greater purpose of God? Would we ask that God restore our budget to when we had more than enough than we needed? Would we ask Jesus to go and solve all of our questions about the new building? Would we ask Jesus if this is the time when he is finally going to restore Bush Hill Presbyterian Church to that time in the 80s when people spilled out the door and we

couldn't hold them all? Will this be that time when we are in fact looking up into heaven, looking for the answers that we want, and would we hear the spirit say, "There's something bigger. There's something greater, something that's more important than attendance figures, and budgets, and cash flow."

God is interested in our becoming faithful witnesses. It's not enough to simply follow him in the way that we choose. We are called to become his disciples to the ends of the earth. Judea was big for them. Samaria was even bigger, and yet he says to go beyond what you have imagined, even the limits of your Samaria, even the experience of your personal torment.

You are descending to the lowest point in your life, that place where you feel completely alone, forsaken. Yes, it's an ongoing act of mystery, this following Jesus as one family. And yes, there is nothing any of us want more than for this experience to be relevant to as many people as possible. That's the only reason we can really justify rebuilding our campus. That's the only reason we can long for more people in worship. As long as we are centered on Christ, those events will happen, and much more. People will be healed who felt completely disenfranchised, who worried about where they would be or who would take care of their families. People who have lost all sense of hope will come and be renewed in this place.

And yes, there will have to be budgets, and planning, and process. But if it's not based on Christ's ascension—the empowering of the Holy Spirit—we will miss the point. God still calls us to repentance, but as reformed Christians we believe that God also calls us to something after we repent. And even while we are in the midst of it, while we are confessing to God our need for the Holy Spirit, God's asking us where will you be my witnesses in all the world?

If we can hold what we believe about Jesus death and his descending in constant tension with what happens on Ascension and on Pentecost, we will be the church. The Spirit will be alive in our midst.