

Preached by Dr. Carl Rush  
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church  
Alexandria, VA  
May 4, 2008  
Ascension of the Lord

1 Peter 5:6-11  
Acts 1:6-14

## MID-LIFE AND MISSION

This year Bush Hill Presbyterian Church will be 50 years old. This year, if Bush Hill was an individual, it would have to face that it is becoming, undeniably, middle age. There are some tough things about turning 50. I realize that most of you have not reached that threshold, and I want to offer this as preparation for what can happen anywhere in your life when you make a transition. It could be from the 9<sup>th</sup> grade to the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. There still could be crises.

We can deal with our transitions prayerfully as the disciples did or we can let them become ominous and life-controlling. I think it was Karl Barth (I didn't look it up, but I remember that he is one of the great theologians) talked about this time between the ascension and next Sunday which is Pentecost. For the Luke/Acts writer, that was stretched to 40 days, for us it's only a week. But Barth said that may be the most significant time in the life of the church after Christ's resurrection because the disciples actually paused long enough to be in prayer together.

We can be led to our next phase of life with a renewed sense of vigor and relevance if we are willing to pause regularly for a protracted period of time and not worry so much about ourselves, but ask God to put us into a purposeful and meaningful act of service. I think that's what the ascension is more about. I think that's what 50<sup>th</sup> anniversaries are more about. I think that today as we prepare to celebrate who we are, it's good for us to say the whole world hungers to be relevant, and that hunger can only be satisfied if we're willing to spend some time in prayer.

Last Thursday I was having some fun with people staying together in the mountains. We were awake early, and we stumbled into the kitchen wearing our own special brand of hiking attire. We all stood there watching the drip coffee maker finish its last drop. Drip. Is it finished? Drip. Hurry up. We huddled in a semi-circle, maybe like monks waiting to go into their confession cells or maybe like hungry wolves waiting to pounce. In those moments before we decided we could grab the pot after the last drip, in those moments of silence, sometimes it's nice if someone pipes up with something to say. So there I was Thursday morning, pre-dawn, and I said to everyone, "Happy, happy, happy Ascension Day." What?" came the response. "Happy ascension of our Lord day," I explained, "this is the week before the last week of Easter. It's that time before the day of Pentecost."

These guys had turned up in their best bird-watching and calling apparatus, and in the darkness of that kitchen deep in the mountains, they were staring at me, kind of like you are, and they wanted to know where I came up with this stuff. "What is the ascension?" That was my cue. So for about two minutes, we had a little refresher course in spiritual basics. "Well, you see, the words of the gospel writer of Luke are reflected again in the

book of Acts, probably because the same person wrote both books. The book begins with a wonderful account of Jesus and his disciples gathering on a hilltop just before he returned to the Father. Kind of what we are like up here today. That's what Ascension Day is."

"Today is Thursday and it's supposed to be a special church day?" mumbled one of the guys. "If it's such a special day, why doesn't it get a Sunday like Easter or Christmas?" "Shut up, knuckle head," one of the guys takes his palm and slaps him on the back of the skull and says, "Now he knows we don't have a clue what he's talking about." So Rush is going to tell us. So I did tell them again. "Luke mentions the ascension twice," I said, "It has to be important. Even if it's on a Thursday, it's very important because this is when Jesus can explain that he is, in fact, going to keep his promise to never leave them alone. He will go with them always, even to the ends of the earth. Yet, at the same time, he's going to fly away from them into heaven."

In just a few moments, we will say those words, "He ascended to sit at the right hand of God the father." But, to be honest, has ascension ever been something we really talked about with anyone? So when we go out and we are enjoying ourselves feeling those times of respite, or when we are enduring the worst possible hardship—whether we're preparing for a mountain-top experience or knowing that we are about to enter the shadows and dark moments of our life—no matter what, we can be confident that our Lord is guiding us and helping us. Can we be so bold as to say even watching us? We are not alone. We're not left to figure this life out by ourselves. Christ is with us still.

It is the most significant thing that as a congregation we will do what the disciples did and pause in this 50<sup>th</sup> year, and we will reclaim some of that wonderful joy that we celebrated as a mission church when we gave more money to Presbytery per capita than any other church even thought of. We will celebrate that mission means giving to Presbytery, and it also means what we will talk about later in the service.

Mission really means relevance which is what those who have gone through a mid-life crises are most grateful for, that they are still relevant to those around them. They're relevant in what they are doing everyday. They're relevant to themselves, they are still interesting, and they have something powerful to offer. For churches that are 50, let us be willing to step back and to recognize what we have to offer that's precious to community and to one another; and that if we weren't here, we'd have to start Bush Hill Presbyterian because we need one another just as surely as we need for Jesus to be with us today.

Some people call relevance being contemporary, and Kierkegaard said that we can only be contemporary with the culture we're in unless we're also willing to be contemporary with the culture of Christ. That's a fancy way of saying that nothing really matters unless you know you are in Jesus. On that Ascension Day, he promised his disciples that he would be in them. If you wonder or doubt, let this be a time when you invite Christ to take full control of your life again. Do so in our Affirmation of Faith, when you confess that he has returned to heaven and will always be our Savior, and do so as you worship God with God's offering of your life. Amen.