

Reverend Matthew M. Williams
Ascension of the Lord
Overwhelmed with Joy
Acts 1: 1-11, Luke 24: 44-53

What is the greatest thing you've ever witnessed? Living here has taught me to slow down and smell the roses. In cities like Miami - everything is so fast paced - and it's wonderful. But often in the business it's hard to notice when little things make life a whole lot better.

I remember when the new Boca Grande causeway bridge opened! I was a witness to this happening! All the sudden, traffic flowed, people were smiling, we had a bridge to life! Some of you were here during those last months of construction. When we took the inaugural trip over the bridge, we were overwhelmed with joy! We were witnesses to the first day the new bridge opened. It was an awesome day.

Jesus isn't on one side of the bridge. Jesus is the bridge. He is the bridge from just living to experiencing real life. He is the bridge from one to the other. He is the connection - even the connection between the earth and the heavens.

You are witnesses of these things!

In today's gospel story Jesus recounts all of those things that his disciples had seen. They were familiar with everything that was written about the Messiah in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms. They were witnesses of these things being fulfilled right in front of their eyes - even in those times that they didn't fully understand what was going on.

They were witnesses of the Messiah - their teacher, friend, and Lord - suffering in the hands of Pilate and the crowds that turned to their praise to scorn. They witnessed his suffering on the road to Golgotha and witnessed the abandonment of his followers.

Mary, witnessed his resurrected body and empty tomb and ran to tell the other disciples that he was alive. Thomas witnessed the scars in his side and affirmed his faith that Jesus was live. Peter witnessed his resurrected body and made his confession that Jesus is indeed Lord, and went to feed his lambs and spread the good news.

The entire entourage of disciples and followers of Jesus were witnesses to the Gospel story - to the scriptures being fulfilled. Over time - day by day and moment by moment - what they witnessed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ became truth to them. They were on board on the bridge to life. They were filled with joy.

Jesus is indeed, Lord. He is Lord of all the earth, Lord of all the nations, Lord over and above everything. Jesus is the bridge that leads us from death to life - and a meaningful life, to boot. Both now and forever more.

The followers of Jesus had witnessed power that was unprecedented, power that was unseen up until this point in their stories. They had witnessed a power that would be given and poured out to them in the Holy Spirit.

The ascension of Jesus Christ into heaven, to sit at his father's right hand, was a moment in time of great joy. The scripture says that the disciples worshiped him, and then returned to Jerusalem with great joy and praised him in the temple. They were to go there and wait for his Spirit to be poured out in power - in a way that they could continue the ministry of reconciliation and wholeness - taking it to the entire world.

I have witnessed many things in the last year that give cause to rejoice! Many Sunday's I feel like these disciples after the ascension - I feel like I am running to the Sanctuary to be among God's people - to praise and celebrate how the truth of the Gospel has changed not only me - but our community.

I have witnessed children being baptized into God's Kingdom - families who have stood before this congregation and committed to raise their children in the Christian faith. I have witnessed this congregation affirm their commitment to come along side families, and to assist them in raising their children and grandchildren. This is cause to rejoice!

I have witnessed prayer groups and prayer meetings fervently praying for people to be made whole in Christ. For people to be healed, delivered, and set free from bondage. I have witnessed answers to these prayers. This is a cause to rejoice!

I have witnessed people from all over the United States and the world show up and worship. Many different kinds of people. People both in and outside of your circles. People who some would label as 'other.' 'Different' and in some parts of the world, unwelcome. But here - we have all worshiped together. This is a cause to rejoice! I've witnessed the Kingdom of God. And you have too!

I have witnessed the fruit of the Holy Spirit's ministry in this congregation locally and around the world. There is nothing more exciting to do than to make a difference in the lives of others through the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We have come alongside so many and answered the call of the Gospel to make disciples of Jesus Christ. We have fed the hungry, healed the sick, and God, working through each of us, has made a way where there seemed to be no way.

You see, we are an extension of those who were with Jesus on that glorious day in Bethany. We were in the shadows of his outstretched arms - receiving the blessing as he ascended into heaven. And, we were given the blessing to rise above any human created boundary to declare one thing: Jesus is Lord.

Jesus is Lord. That is where the rubber meets the road in being spirit filled missionary disciples. By Jesus rising from the dead and ascending, he broke the power of descending. He reigns, as Lord of heaven and earth, his Kingdom will have no end.

It's, in part, a political issue. And it was for these early followers of Christ. The disciples and all of those who converted to the Christian Faith in these times made a declaration that put some of them in danger - and led some of them to death. They proclaimed that Jesus is Lord - not Caesar. Jesus reigns with, over, and above all things - not Caesar. Jesus is the way, the truth, the life - and the only way to get to God - not Caesar.

Ephesians 1: 20-23 says: "God's power was at work in Christ when God raised him from the dead and sat him at God's right side in the heavens, far above every ruler and authority and power and angelic power, any power that might be named not only now but in the future. God put everything under Christ's feet and made him head of everything in the church, which is his body. His body, the church, is the fullness of Christ, who fills everything in every way."

The early disciples who carried this message and those early converts were not just choosing to believe in Jesus, their belief was coupled with conversion. Their allegiance was to now not to their governments systems, not to temple authorities, not to earthly Kings and Caesars and royal families. Their allegiance was to the one who lives forevermore, and whose Kingdom will have no end. The ascension was yet another means of grace freely given for them to witness. By Jesus ascending to his Father he visually showed them that he will reign forevermore. Furthermore, he promised them at Bethany that though he is going to his Father's side, they will not be alone, for his Spirit - the comforter and advocate of the Gospel - will come upon them - they will be witnesses.

Just as Jesus ascended and rose, we too can rise above and transcend our human boundaries when receiving the power of the Spirit. We have to die in order to be a true witness. "The church is not a club with a voluntary code for elite insiders [with] like-minded propaganda existing only to underwrite our comfort zone. [This] is no gospel at all." (Clifton Black) By proclaiming Jesus as Lord - and joining in his work - and seeing his grace in our lives - we are true witnesses.

In the ascension heaven and earth collide - are conjoined. On earth, by God's grace, we get glimpses on heavenly glory. In heaven, eternal souls rejoice in the Kingdom progressing and in operation here. The common denominator is this: Jesus is Lord of heaven and earth. We have a good King - a good Lord - who calls and brings us together to proclaim and live out the good news in our daily lives.

Because of the ascension of Jesus, we are free to live in a new reality, where death and the threat of death no longer have dominion. We are free to live for others in a world that has yet to hear this good and wondrous news. We can live courageously, even in a world where the fighting is still going on around us, perpetuated by those who have not yet heard that the battle has been decided. We are free to experience the Jesus - of God with us - who still breaks into our present world giving himself to us. We don't know what the future will bring, so much as we know that the future is safe in Jesus' hands. And finally, we too can return to the world after our encounter with the Risen One, hearts and heads held high, rejoicing and worshiping and blessing God.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.
Amen.