

Sermon: "One Can at a Time"  
Kirk of St James  
Sunday May 21, 2023  
Rev. Amanda Henderson-Bolton  
Acts 1:1-11, Psalm 93, Luke 24:44-53

It has been seven weeks since we woke up on Easter morning. It has been seven weeks since we shared a morning breakfast and celebrated Christ rising from the dead. And since that miraculous morning life has gone on. Meals, work, appointments, commitments, sleep, repeat. That is simply the nature of life. How we both live in and understand this world however is shaped almost entirely by the events of the easter season beginning with Jesus' death and resurrection and now ascension. Today is an important day, and so closely tied with the resurrection events, some would call it part two. Today we celebrate the ascension of Jesus, the day when he is taken back up into heaven. Compared to the resurrection this event does not receive nearly as much attention, but it is still an important part of the resurrection story. So important in fact that we even state it in our creeds "On the third day he rose again from the dead, he ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty."

In many ways the ascension does not receive the attention it deserves. The event lacks the shock and joy of the resurrection--people are not running to get there or running to get away and tell the good news. Even artists throughout history have struggled with portraying this solemn moment. Often Jesus is depicted as floating upward into the clouds wearing a flowing white robe, while the disciples look on in fear and wonder. Or there is the scene in one cathedral where a pair of feet are sticking out of the clouds while the disciples are gathered around staring. Not the most majestic of scenes. But here is why it is important.

After the resurrection, (according to Acts) Jesus remains with the disciples for forty days. During that time Jesus continues to teach them about the kingdom of God and showing them

signs and wonders. We know from the gospels the disciples have a difficult time grasping the truth of who Jesus is. The whole group of them keep misunderstanding what Jesus is trying to do. Once again just before the ascension their confusion manifests itself in their questions. Jesus has been raised from the dead, spends an extra forty days teaching them, and then they ask him "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the Kingdom to Israel?" You must give them credit, they are curious, they are trying to understand, but they are still caught up in what they think a Messiah should be. The picture is much larger than the restoration of Israel, it is one that takes in all of humanity. Jesus is not upset that they still do not understand that larger picture. He knows that he has taught them well, he is not leaving them alone, he knows that things will work out, and he trusts in this group who has followed him, grieved, celebrated, and walked in his footsteps. After his final exhortation for them to be his witnesses on earth, he is taken up into heaven.

It is in this moment that "the disciples glimpse the glory that eternally shapes the Christian proclamation and sets them on the course that changes world history. After the death of Jesus and even in some instances after the resurrection of Christ, the disciples are fearful, they lock themselves away from the world because they do not know what is going to happen. After they see Jesus taken back up into the heaven they joyfully go out into the world. They go to the temple where they can be found praising God. Life will never be the same, they will not return to their homes, to their nets, to their former lives." They will go out into the world. Unlike Lazarus who was raised from the dead, but then later died again, the life of Jesus has gone on. Jesus will never, ever again be buried and sealed in a tomb. This resurrection is different from the resurrection of Lazarus. In that moment they realized that Jesus was not only part of the world, but he also returned to the Father.

As one commentator noted "The good news for those left standing on the Judean hillside is that Jesus not only comes from God, but He also returns to God. This is the true scope of movement for followers of the Way--we come from God; we return to God. The challenge in the meantime is to keep our lives centered on God, rooted and grounded in God, allowing God to be the one in whom we live and move and have our being, here and now, on this earth." Ultimately that is what our faith is all about. We stood by the empty tomb of Easter morning and rejoiced, and now 40 days later we find ourselves on the Judean hillside looking up. But we cannot remain that way forever, frozen, looking up at a set of feet sticking out of the clouds. We need to look out at the world around us as the disciples did and set our face towards the city to share the good news. By going out into our communities, by serving in any way that we are able either this weekend or any other day of the year we enter the world and share our joy, share the good news, and strive to live out the joy of both resurrection and ascension. From God we have come, to God we shall return, and we look to him as we live our lives in between.

Looking out. Sometimes it feels like it can be hard to do. Sometimes it feels like an overwhelming task. Sometimes the world around us just seems a little too broken. Whenever I find myself thinking that I am reminded of a song we always sang in Sunday School. "Jesus bids us shine like a pure clear, like a little candle burning in the night, in this world of darkness, so let us shine, you in your small corner and I in mine." While the news often tends to skew toward the negative there are also countless good news stories. I have to say one of my favourite stories is from a CTV news article in 2018 about a woman named Gia Tran. I want to share it with you:

The deposit on a single bottle or can isn't much, but a Vancouver woman is finding a way to take that small amount and make a big difference. Gia Tran has just reached a huge milestone. She collects bottles and cans, one at a time. That's how she finds the money to help the people she loves.

"I help people... I give money, I don't know how much," she told CTV News.

"Every day, I give."

Everything the 62-year-old picks up in a day she exchanges for cash, then gives the money to the BC Cancer Foundation.

While the deposit on an individual item can be as low as five cents, it adds up.

"Today I have \$25! I gave \$20," she said Thursday.

Sarah Roth, CEO of the BC Cancer Foundation, says they've gotten to know Tran over time: "She's gotten to know us, we look forward to her."

She averages about \$15 a week in donations, and over more than two decades, her total is well into the thousands.

"It's been 21 years and \$15,000. That's remarkable," Roth said.

The money goes to the foundation's charitable programs, including cancer research.

Tran says she didn't have any money to give 21 years ago, but realized she could raise it through the deposit on any recyclable container.

"Twenty years ago, I have children, I cannot work, no job. I think I want to help, I have no money, I don't know why," she said.

Then, "I look at cans! I have money! I help people."

Friends and family often tell her to slow down, but she keeps going.

"She brings a smile to everyone's face. She's always smiling," Roth said.

Individual bottles and cans aren't worth much, but Tran knows every little bit counts.

We cannot fix all the world's problems, neither could the disciples. They simply looked at the world around them and got to work with whatever was in front of them. Sometimes that meant proclaiming the gospel, sometimes it meant physical healing, sometimes emotional. Just as Jesus engaged in the world around them in the ways that were needed—despite how obtuse they were the disciples learned what they needed.

Friends, we too have that ability. We may donate money, time, cookies, prayers, we may write letters, we may fill food bowls at the Humane society, we may share the gospel message with someone who is searching, we may sit with someone who feels lonely. But whatever we do, may we do it in the name of the Lord. Martin Luther had this wonderful saying "If it falls to your lot to be a street sweeper, sweep streets like Michelangelo painted pictures, sweep streets like Beethoven composed music ... Sweep streets like Shakespeare wrote poetry. Sweep streets so well that all the host of heaven and earth will have to pause and say: Here lived a great street sweeper who swept his job well." We are each unique and wonderfully made, and we each have gifts to share with the world. May we each light up our corner of the world, until the darkness is chased away, and the Kingdom of God has come.