



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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MAY 13, 2018
ASCENSION SUNDAY

A Disappearing Act? Acts 1:1-26

Jesus is at it again! After his resurrection these mysterious comings and goings happen. He appears in locked rooms, on desolate roads, and on deserted beaches and then vanishes into thin air or, in this case, into the clouds above. Today is Ascension Sunday and we believe, as scripture tells us and The Apostles Creed affirms, that Jesus “ascended into heaven and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.” The story we have read this morning is one of the foundation stones of our faith.

As people of faith, we accept certain things that defy logic and experience and may, in fact, counter scientific fact as we know it. There are things in our story of faith that make no sense whatsoever, but we choose to believe them because they are matters of faith. Jesus’ ascension is one of those things.

What is most important in all of the stories of our faith, especially in the stories about Jesus, is not so much *how* things happened but *why* they happened. Why did God choose to be born in human form? To experience life as we live it. Why did angels announce the Messiah’s birth to shepherds in Bethlehem rather than to the priests and rulers in Jerusalem? To make clear that God cares about all people regardless of class, wealth, position, or power. Why did Jesus heal people on the spot? To witness God’s healing power for us all. Why did God raise Jesus from the dead? To demonstrate God’s immense love for us and his desire that we embrace the true life God offers us all. Why did Jesus appear to the disciples after his resurrection? To offer them assurance that God had not abandoned them. Why did Jesus ascend into heaven, disappearing and leaving them with the mandate to share the Gospel with the world? Why indeed?

Logistically, the story of Jesus’ ascension tidies up the whole story and explains what is happening. Jesus had taken leave of heaven in order to live as one of us, but at some point it was necessary for him to return. For this reason, Jesus’ ascension is a nice bookend to his story on earth. Beyond completing his sojourn on earth, however, Jesus’ ascension marks his return

to the heavenly realm where he reigns over all of life. And I think there is another, extremely important reason for Jesus to leave. It was necessary for Jesus to return to heaven because if he stayed on earth and continued to appear at random, people would do nothing but wait for his next appearance. Nothing else would happen. In fact, that is exactly what the disciples did immediately after Jesus' ascension. Luke tells us that they returned to Jerusalem and were constantly in the temple praying—all of the remaining eleven apostles and some of the women, including Jesus' mother, Mary. They prayed and prayed and prayed and waited.

They waited. Jesus told them that he would not abandon them but would send the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, the Paraclete, the One who would stand in his place with them day by day. So in the temple they waited and prayed and prayed and waited until the Spirit visited them on Pentecost—which we will celebrate next week.

Jesus had to go away, to disappear, because otherwise the disciples simply would have waited until his next appearance. And then they would have waited until his next appearance. And then they would have waited until his next appearance. You get the picture. The Gospel might not have been shared. The story might not have been told. God's ministry might never have moved forward.

Jesus disappeared so that the disciples would appear. Jesus stepped back so that they would step forward.

If Jesus had not disappeared from their sight, Peter might never have become the effective leader that he was for the community of believers. He might never have felt the need to preach in the powerful manner he did. If Jesus had not disappeared, Saul might never have encountered Christ on the road to Damascus because the community would have remained hidden and afraid and the Gospel would have been contained to a small number of folks in Jerusalem. Saul would have had no cause to eradicate the believers because they would not be causing a stir in the city. The budding faith we now know as Christianity would not have been a threat to anybody's sense of power because the believers might not have done anything but wait and pray. The encouragement Barnabas offered so generously would not have been necessary. No one would have been trying to do anything other than pray and wait. Everyone would have remained huddled together waiting for Jesus to pop in again.

Had Jesus not disappeared, we might not be here today. Jesus entrusted his ministry to his disciples who took the Gospel to the ends of the earth. Had they remained in Jerusalem and waited for Jesus' next appearance, the faith might have withered and died. Jesus had to disappear so that the followers of Jesus would appear.

In fact, Jesus' ascension was not his first "disappearing act." From the day he stepped out of the baptismal waters of the Jordan River and walked into the wilderness, Jesus disappeared. He traveled from one town to another. He taught, he preached, he counseled, he challenged, he comforted, he healed. He moved on. He never hung around for the accolades and platitudes. He never established a home office, a place that centered his ministry in one locale. Jesus did what was needed and moved on. He disappeared.

Perhaps Jesus was offering us a model for our ministry. Jesus showed us how to take care of one another, how to share the Gospel in word and deed, and how to "disappear" so that the power of God's grace could do its work.

I am not suggesting that Christian ministry has to be clandestine. We certainly should not spread the Gospel like an elite team of spiritual soldiers, ambushing unsuspecting souls, assaulting them with the Gospel, and vanishing into the shadows. No, what I think Jesus teaches us is that we are to live out the Gospel day by day in such a way that other people see more of God in their lives and less of us. We disappear so that God can appear.

For instance, when Jesus taught his disciples about being generous, he said,

"Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

Matthew 6:1-4

When Jesus taught them to pray, he said,

“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Matthew 6:5-6

When Jesus spoke to them about the honesty and integrity of faith he said,

“And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Matthew 6:16-18

Keep in mind that the two candidates to replace Judas as the twelfth apostle—Justus and Matthias (who was selected)—are never mentioned again in scripture. We know from tradition that both of them continued to share the Gospel for the rest of their lives, but the Bible has no mention of them. They disappeared into the Gospel they proclaimed.

We disappear so that God in Christ can appear. We are often the conduit of God’s grace, but we are not that grace and we certainly are not God! As the Apostle Paul put it,

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Galatians 2:19b-20

On one occasion, Jesus and his disciples were out in the Judean countryside preaching and baptizing believers while John the Baptist and his disciples were doing the same. Some of John’s followers came to their teacher and said,

“Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptizing, and all are going to him.” John answered, “No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven. You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, ‘I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.’ He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease.” John 3:26-30

We are the “friend of the bridegroom” and rejoice when Christ speaks and acts in our midst. The life of faith is a life of service, but not service for the sake of self. As John advised his students, in order for Christ to increase, we must decrease. In other words, in all that we do as followers of Christ, we focus the spotlight on God but not on ourselves. We must disappear.

On this day in particular, I can think of no better example of a disappearing act than a mother. Granted, when a woman is expecting, tenderly caring for her child in the womb, a great deal of attention is focused upon her for obvious reasons. When her child is born, however, he or she becomes the focus of the mother’s every waking moment (and, I suspect, of her sleeping moments as well!). From birth until that child is launched into the world, the mother gives all that she has and is to nurture, train, instruct, and shape that child, preparing them for the life God wants for us all. It is the child who is the fortunate recipient of this generous affection and instruction while the mother steps all the more to the background as her daughter or son steps fully into life. What better example of a mother’s selflessness than that of Mary, the mother of Jesus?

Author Ann Crittenden found the perfect description for the selfless service of motherhood in the book *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein. She wrote,

When my son was small, we loved to read *The Giving Tree*, a book about a tree that gave a little boy his apples to eat, branches to climb, and shade to sleep under. This made them both happy. As the boy grew into a man, the tree gave him her apples to sell for money, then her branches to build a house, and finally her trunk to make a boat. When the boy became a tired old man, the tree, by now nothing but a stump, offered him all she

had left to sit on and rest. I would read the last line, "And the tree was happy" with tears flowing down my cheeks every time.¹

Actress Olivia Wilde summed up this observation of a mother's attitude several years ago at the Courage in Journalism Awards sponsored by the International Women's Media Foundation. Having become a mother only six months earlier, Ms. Wilde learned quickly what being a parent is all about. She reflected,

"The amazing thing about becoming a parent is that you will never again be your own first priority . . . The gift of motherhood is the selflessness that it introduces you to, and I think that's really freeing."²

Jesus himself said it this way: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:12-13). We disappear so other people can appear.

Jesus could not stay here on earth because it was God's desire for his people to continue his work. He had to disappear so that his followers would step up. They, in turn, learned to disappear into their ministry so that God in Christ might appear all the clearer to anyone paying attention. Though our ministry may have changed over two thousand years of faithful witness, God's mandate has not changed. We must still decrease in order that Christ may increase. We do nothing for honor or gratitude or fame. Instead, we minister in God's name then disappear so that others might see Jesus. Amen.

¹Ann Crittenden, *The Price of Motherhood*, as cited in "The Price of Motherhood - A Mother's Selfless Service," *She Knows* (September 28, 2007); available online at: www.sheknows.com/parenting/articles/1619/the-price-of-motherhood-a-mothers-selfless-service.

²Wade Rouse with reporting by Reagan Alexander, "Olivia Wilde: Motherhood Has Taught Me Selflessness," *People* (October 29, 2014); available online at: <http://celebritybabies.people.com/2014/10/29/olivia-wilde-motherhood-selfless-international-womens-media-foundation/>.

May 13, 2018

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

“Gracious,” “truthful,” “holy,” and “mighty” are words we always use to describe you, O God, but, we admit, they are not always the words that we would use to describe ourselves. You call us to a high and purposeful attitude about life and we are not certain that we are either worthy or able to attain it. We are, however, humbled and grateful that you would choose us to live the life of faith. Thank you.

We would ask that you prepare us for this life by giving us the desire and courage to live faithfully. Help us to remember that the life of faith is not dull or boring or without fun; rather, remind us that it is a life of discovery and adventure and joy unimaginable. Fit us for this life, we pray.

In the midst of prayers for ourselves and pleas for the health and well-being of others, we pause to thank you, O God, for the gift of mothers. We are grateful for the tenderness and care they provide as we grow and change day by day. We thank you for the insights they instill in us, the values they impart, and the faith they so eagerly share. We are grateful for the patience and forgiveness and humor which make it possible for us to move from one day to the next. And we thank you for our mother’s love which teaches and heals, corrects and guides, encourages and strengthens and endures. We thank you, O God, that our mothers remind us of you.

Comfort each of us whose mother is no longer present and struggle with those of us whose mother was not what she wanted to be or what we needed her to be. Grant peace to each mother who has had to say goodbye to her child whether because of defiance, despair, or death. Bless each mother who is desperately trying to save her child or get them back on the right path. Thank you, O God, for the gift of our mothers and for the mothers’ gift of their children.

Open us to the same kind of selflessness that we see in our mothers which they learned from you, O God. Thank you for grace upon grace and gift upon gift which is ours through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.