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The Last Word  
Part 2  
Ascension Sunday  
Acts 1:1-11  
Luke 24:44-53

In my first appointment at Monroe St. Church in Toledo  
where I stayed for four years  
I moved 3 times.

Seminary to an apartment in Toledo,  
Apartment to one of the Monroe St. parsonages  
That parsonage to the parsonage of the church  
to which my husband had been newly assigned.

When we left Toledo for Batavia  
our son was a toddler  
and just let me say  
for the record  
that trying to pack  
when your child is emptying the boxes  
as quickly as you are filling them  
is a real pain.

We have had some real ADVENTURES in moving  
but one thing you can count on  
whether moving across town  
or moving across the state  
moving always creates huge changes  
and always requires some re-prioritizing  
and re-focusing.

Last week we re-remembered  
the last supper  
and Jesus' last word to the disciples  
which was very simply  
Love.

*Love one another as I have loved you.  
By this everyone will know  
that you are my disciples. (John 13:34b-35a)*

Shortly after that last meal  
that last word,  
Jesus was arrested,  
beaten,  
and crucified.

And then the glorious Easter morning-resurrection.  
During this return visit  
Jesus appeared again to his disciples,  
ate with them,  
and talked some more.

This morning-Ascension Sunday-  
the end of the great 50 days of Easter,  
Jesus is once again  
filling out a change of address card—  
he is once again standing at the door  
saying those last minute things  
that are on his heart.

The last words of Jesus-Part 2.

*You are my witnesses....*

And with that the disciples found themselves left  
standing there

gaping open mouthed  
up at the heavens.

Just standing there,  
transfixed,  
frozen in the moment.

Until finally two men-two angels  
come along and after momentarily  
joining the disciples in their upward gaze  
snap them back to reality.

*"Why do you stand looking into heaven?"*

You were given something to do,  
were you not?

A mission.  
*To be witnesses to all the earth.*

So why are you just standing there??  
Waiting for some last words?!  
You've already had several  
pre- and post-resurrection speeches.

Are you waiting for a sign?  
Jesus just ascended into heaven  
THAT was the sign.

And so for the disciples  
and for us  
we are reminded that  
it is moving day once again  
and it is time to refocus...

Jesus' last words part 2  
build on last weeks last words....  
*Love one another*  
for  
*you shall be my witnesses to the ends of the earth.*

That is our statement of mission for the church.  
Ascension reminds us that the churches' task  
is not to stand around  
gawking up at the heavens,  
but rather to return to the world  
devote ourselves to prayer,  
make room that we might be filled  
with the Holy Spirit,  
and be ready to walk through the doors  
that God continues to open  
in our time.

It is very simple really--our mission.  
To tell the story of Jesus.  
To tell how our lives are changed  
because of that story.

It is something we seem to find incredibly difficult.  
If you want to clear a room  
just mention evangelism  
or faith-sharing.

Even though as Christians we know that  
people are hungry for something beside malls,  
money,  
competition,  
and rat races.

We also know that the answers  
will not be found in the self-help section  
of Barnes and Noble,  
they will not be found in alcohol, drugs,  
overeating,  
over-spending  
shallow relationships  
or anything else folks might grasp for  
in their search for meaning,  
peace,  
and fulfillment.

This type of quick-fix seeking,  
devoid of deep commitment...  
the sharing of our deepest selves...  
and the engagement of a relationship with God --  
just doesn't work.

What is called for  
is a little refocusing..

We need not crane our necks  
scouring the heavens for signs,  
looking for a God who is too high up  
and too far away.

Rather, we find God when we redirect our gaze to other  
people,  
and the world around us.

When we remember that Jesus  
ceaselessly beckoned the hungry  
the sick  
the lonely,  
the imprisoned,  
we become witnesses.

When we turn outward to the world's need,  
then we are Christ's witnesses.

When we respond to the pain of the world  
then we are Christ's witnesses.

When we add the extra leaf to the table  
so that all persons are included at the banquet  
then we are Christ's witnesses.

Even the little things we do each day...  
from recycling,  
to rescuing an animal from the shelter,  
buying a cup of lemonade from child entrepreneurs,  
giving the frazzled waiter a good tip,  
exchanging a friendly greeting with our neighbor,  
in all of these  
we are Christ's witnesses.

In her book, *Traveling Mercies*,  
Anne Lamott explains  
why she makes her son Sam go to church.

She started attending a small Presbyterian church  
early in her pregnancy.

One Sunday at the end of worship  
she announced that she was pregnant,  
and people cheered.

It was not the reaction she expected  
as she was not married.

She reported that even people raised  
in Bible-thumping homes in the deep South clapped,  
even the old women whose grown-up boys  
had been in jails or prisons  
rejoiced with her.

They reached out their arms and adopted her.  
They bought clothes and blankets  
for the new baby.

They lugged in casseroles  
that she could freeze and use later.

The church members kept telling her  
that this new baby was going to be  
part of their church family.

And then they began to slip her money.  
A bent-over woman on Social Security  
would sidle up and stuff her pockets  
with tens and twenties.

Another would bring baggies  
filled with dimes week after week.

Anne brought her son Sam to church  
when he was five days old.  
The congregation stood in line  
and called him "our baby".

People in that little church kept her going.  
They cared,  
reached out,  
prayed,  
loved her  
and saw her through some hard days.

The one woman still brings her bags of dimes  
every Sunday  
although she is doing much better financially.

Anne gives them to homeless people.

She concludes,  
"Why do I make Sam go to church  
(when) none of his other friends go?

I make him go because somebody brings me dimes."

For when she looked around her  
what she saw in the care-worn faces  
and the loving gestures of the congregation  
was the face of God.

It's all about changing our focus.  
The angels told the disciples  
to redirect their gaze.  
Look around you.  
Look beyond you.

*You will receive the power  
when the Holy Spirit comes over you  
and you will be my witnesses.*

The great shift for the early church in Acts  
is when the church moved  
out beyond itself  
and into the world of the outsider.

Each time that we the church  
turn our gaze from the heavens  
and realize  
that we really do save our lives  
by losing our lives  
in some cause beyond ourselves—  
we become witnesses.

Because when Jesus tells his disciples to be his witnesses  
he doesn't ask them to try to witness to something  
they have not seen or experienced.

Their witness,  
our witness is simply sharing  
what has happened to us.

The different times and places  
and ways  
we have experienced Christ.

How Jesus Christ has made a difference in our lives.

Our testimony is that we have experienced  
that there is something afoot in the world  
something that defies rational explanation  
and that something is called the outbreak  
of the kingdom of God.

Those times you were walking in the valley of despair  
when you could barely get yourself out of bed  
but somehow you did  
and you went on with life.

And you learned to laugh,  
and trust,  
and hold close your dear ones.

When looking back you know  
you never could have kept going without God  
and the real life angels  
God often sends to us in those desperate times.

*You are witnesses...*

Maybe you are one of the many very busy people,  
who get so caught up in doing this and that  
all good things  
that your life becomes  
a whirlwind of activity.

Until one day something pulls you up short  
and takes your breath away...

A sunset....

the face of your life partner  
a child tugging on your hand  
to come and play--  
and suddenly right there in all that crazy busyness  
you realize God is here.

*You are witnesses ...*

The next steps of our life in Christ are unknowable.  
Yet, our together as a vital faith community  
is never static.

It is ever unfolding. And rarely boring!

The unfolding may be as subtle  
as learning to care for others  
where we thought we could not.

It may be as uncertain  
as trusting the very future of our community  
to God  
when we have no idea what God will do.

It may be as distressing,  
and as relieving  
as letting go of patterns,  
structures,  
whole bureaucracies  
that served us well for years  
but no longer.

It may be as bold as identifying publicly with persons  
our society and  
--based on the action of General Conference--  
our denomination  
shuns.

Those that are restricted from preaching,  
and from being allowed to affirm  
and celebrate in the church  
their love and life-long commitment  
to a partner.

May we Summit on 16<sup>th</sup> continue our witness  
to the grave injustice of this position.

May we as a community alive in Christ  
allows ourselves to be drawn  
further into the unknown  
in order that, bit by bit,  
we may see more clearly.

May we like the first disciples  
dare to live the new life in Christ  
engaged in simple,  
bold,  
creative acts  
of living out God's healing love.

May we dare to change our focus  
knowing that it will change us.

Jesus last words of love and witness  
become incarnate wherever and whenever  
we venture into a future  
when only the Spirit  
and not our tightly grasped designs  
shape us for the mission that we share.

This is the church in mission.  
Brothers and sisters,  
this is no time to be standing around  
gaping up at the heavens.

The time has come to live out the mission  
to which we have been called,  
*to be witnesses to the ends of the earth.*

Almighty God, send your Holy Spirit upon us so that we may  
perfectly love you and be your witnesses to all the world.

Resources:

Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies*, New York: Pantheon  
Books, 1999, pp. 95-105.

William Willimon. *Change of Focus*. Pulpit Resource. May  
2008.