

Easter 7-May 21, 2023

Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish

Acts 1:6-14 and John 17:1-11

"This Is Eternal Life" Sermon by Randall J. Questad

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

Is not uncommon for people to be looking for Jesus in the wrong places. In the first reading for today which recorded Jesus' ascension into heaven, all of Jesus' disciples were speechless as they watched Jesus being carried off in a cloud into heaven. As they were still staring into the skies, two men suddenly appeared to ask them why they were looking up toward heaven? Notice that the two men don't wait for a response. And what were the disciples going to say? Who would believe the story they just witnessed? We have seen people who were once standing next to us disappear into the clouds in hot air balloons, airplanes, and parasails, but no one has ever seen a person just disappear toward the heavens on a cloud.

Jesus had told his disciples that they were to be his witnesses not just in Jerusalem, but they were now to spread the message of Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth. These disciples had seen first-hand Jesus perform some impressive miracles. And most recently of all, they were witnesses of Jesus' death on the cross and now they witnessed that Jesus was alive and speaking to them not from a cloud, but in the resurrected body of Jesus Christ. Few would believe the story these disciples would tell if it were not that Jesus had given them the power of the Holy Spirit so that their message would be believed by others who were not eyewitnesses of the message Jesus now sent them to proclaim. Up until now, these disciples always had Jesus by their side to proclaim his message, but now who would believe whatever they would say when they would begin their story that they had just witnessed Jesus disappear into heaven in a cloud?

The answer to what they would say to people who did not yet believe in Jesus Christ was not going to be found by staring off into the empty skies.

It makes me wonder if the two men who brought the disciples' attention from the skies back down to earth were the two angels that Mary saw sitting in the empty tomb of Jesus and who asked her why she was crying and who she was looking for? Again, Jesus was not going to be found staring into an empty space. Whenever we look for Jesus in places that seem empty or far off, we too might be asked by these two angels, "Who are you looking for by staring off into space?"

These two men who showed up didn't scold the disciples for not getting busy with the mission that Jesus had just given spread out and spread his message. Instead, these two men reminded the disciples that although Jesus was no longer next to them in body, Jesus would be going with them to the ends of the earth in his Spirit. The disciples who could often be accused of never paying attention to what Jesus was doing or teaching them were now starting to show some signs of what followers of Jesus might do. This was evident in what the disciples did next.

There aren't many tv shows today or even in the past that have shown where people go to church. One of my favorite episodes of Andy Griffith is when a powerful preacher had been invited to preach a Sunday morning sermon in the quaint little church in Mayberry. Barney and Gomer start off wide awake, but before long they are trying their best to keep their eyes open. They only wake up when the fire and brimstone preacher raise his voice, but then struggle to pay attention again when the preacher's voice calms down. After the service is over, Barney thanks the preacher for delivering a powerful sermon even though it seems doubtful that he heard a word. Jesus' disciples had just done the same thing while Jesus was praying in the

Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus pleaded with them that they would stay awake with him as his hour of going to the cross to suffer and die was near. But try as they might, they all fell asleep as Jesus prayed. But that didn't mean these disciples didn't learn something on that night.

Before the disciples spread out from Jerusalem to deliver an almost unbelievable message to the ends of the earth, they gathered in one place and devoted themselves to prayer, just as they had witnessed Jesus do before he finished the task on earth that he came to do.

Prayer in its most basic definition is you speaking to God. But there is another interesting aspect of prayer that we can learn from Jesus. Whenever Jesus prays, he does so loud enough so that others can overhear what he prays for. The disciples overheard Jesus that his Father's will be done before he suffered and died. The disciples overheard Jesus pray for them before they were sent out to the ends of the earth with his message. Jesus was not just speaking to God when he prayed. He wanted his disciples and you and I to overhear what he was praying for before he ascended to be with his Father in heaven.

One of the things that we overheard Jesus say when he prayed was that eternal life is not what we most often think it is. If we overhear other people talk about eternal life, they believe it is heaven. But when Jesus speaks of eternal life, he never mentions heaven.

Whenever you hear Jesus begin a sentence with the two words, "This is" it is time for you to wake up and pay attention to what follows. Jesus said, "This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." Eternal life is not something off in the clouds, but eternal life is Jesus Christ come down to you in the message that was given by Jesus to be proclaimed to the world. Eternal life is not later, it is now. Eternal life is not only for the disciples that overheard Jesus pray, but eternal life is yours because you too have overheard today that Jesus was praying for you even if you were starting to doze off.

Jesus ends his prayer by praying for our protection. And how many examples do you and I have knowing that we have been protected from so many things that could have brought us harm. This time of year, I often remember when I was probably 5-6 years old, and I was with my father and grandfather having lunch with them in the field while they were planting, and I walked next to the four row planter when dad tripped the marker and the disk blade of the marker just missed my head. I'm sure you can remember having close calls and were thankful that Jesus prayed for your protection.

I have never met Deb Bender, but we have prayed for her. As I was watching the news early one morning this week, I heard her name in the news story. We prayed for her because she needed a lung transplant, and the story was about her successfully receiving a lung transplant. Isn't it amazing that our heavenly Father hears every one of our prayers and promises to protect us in the best way determined by His wisdom and will, even when His will is to call his children from the suffering of this world to rest in his arms?

The disciples of Jesus stopped to take time to pray before being sent to deliver this good news that eternal life is knowing God. You have heard once again how before Jesus ascended into heaven that he prayed for you and that you would believe that eternal life is knowing God. Now we are sent to proclaim this story to the world around us. Amen.