

So That

(Sermon by Rev. John Dieterly, May 16, 2010)

Acts 1:1-14 ¹In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning ²until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. ⁴While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. “This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me; ⁵for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” ⁶So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” ⁷He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” ⁹When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. ¹¹They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

¹²Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day’s journey away. ¹³When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. ¹⁴All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

John 17:1-11 ¹After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, ²since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. ³And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. ⁴I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. ⁵So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

⁶“I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. ⁷Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; ⁸for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. ⁹I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. ¹⁰All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. ¹¹And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.

Were you aware that last Thursday was Ascension Day? Having said this, I am sure that most of you have some awareness that Ascension Day is the day we remember when Jesus ascended into heaven. According to Luke, and the first verses in our Scripture lesson from The Acts of the Apostles, Jesus made a number of appearances after His resurrection. These appearances occurred over a period of 40 days. On that 40th day, Jesus was again with the disciples. He again had to deal with the question of restoring the kingdom to Israel. It is almost as if the disciples were stuck on this worldly kingdom idea. Jesus had often taught them that his kingdom was not of this world, that his kingdom was different, so different, from their earthly experiences. But they were trapped in the logic of their day. They could only think of a kingdom in worldly terms. in terms of battles, and wars, and kings who sat on thrones. As much as Jesus taught them that God’s Realm was different, they just couldn’t understand. It would take a whole new approach and a whole new experience of God before the disciples could begin to understand this.

We suffer comparable limitations – there is so much we still don’t understand. It has often been said that the more we know, the more we realize we don’t know. This is equally true of heavenly things. Just as an example, I recently read an interesting paper on the personality of God. If you study the Old Testament, God is best described by his actions. He called Abraham. He led his people out of captivity in Egypt. He sent messages to his Chosen People, Israel. Even when Moses asked him who he was, he answered with a verb that we translate,

I AM WHO I AM! We like to think of God as a person, as in Father, Son and Holy Ghost. But what happens if we try to think of God as a verb instead of a noun? Can you do that? Try to think about God as energy, power and action, not an old man on a throne. When we think about the Holy Spirit, we may come close to thinking of God as a verb. But especially when we think about Jesus, we think of a man. We find it easier to relate to Jesus as a person, someone we can talk to, a person who has gone through the same pain and heartache of this life, God in the form of a person who understands our struggles because he has been one of us.

Ascension then becomes the event that changes our relationship to God in Christ. Because Christ has ascended, we can no longer relate to God as to another person, but the energy of God, the strength of God, the presence of God, comes to us through the Holy Spirit.

Maybe this is too cerebral – maybe we need to come at this concept from a different perspective. Sometimes we struggle to understand the how and what of Scripture, when it might be more important to understand the purpose of God's actions recorded in Scripture. In the 17th chapter of John, Jesus is focused on purpose. This chapter is the prayer of our Lord before he went out to the garden and was betrayed by Judas. If you read this chapter carefully, you will find that Jesus uses the word "So that" 13 times in this prayer. Jesus did not pray for things for himself, but all things in his prayer were filled with purpose. Listen to some of the purposefulness in our lesson for today: Jesus prays, "Father, glorify your Son SO THAT the Son may glorify you" God gave Christ authority over all people SO THAT he might give eternal life to all who were given to Him. Eternal life is given to people SO THAT they may know the Father, and the Son. Later in the chapter, Jesus prays for all who come to believe in him through the words of the disciples, SO THAT they may all be one. And he prays that we, the church may be completely one, SO THAT the world may know that Christ has been sent by the Father, and SO THAT the whole world might know that God loves those who are His. In this prayer of our Lord Jesus, everything he requests has a purpose and the purpose is not for his own benefit, or even for the benefit of the disciples, but all the things included in the prayer have the purpose of bringing glory to God.

Think about the "purposefulness" of your faith life. There should be a purpose in your worship. You should come to worship God SO THAT you might hear his Word, and be strengthened for the week to come, SO THAT you might call others to Christ and bring glory to God, and to your own calling. There should be purpose in your reading of Scripture, SO THAT you might understand God's Word, and SO THAT you might live according to God's Will, and bring glory to God. And most of all, think about purpose in your prayer life. Sometimes our prayers can be rather self serving. Whenever you pray for something, have you asked about the purpose? Suppose you are praying to get a new job – why are you seeking the new job? Is it for your own comfort or your own well-being? Or can you visualize a higher purpose: maybe being able to serve others through your work, or maybe just to be able to give more to the church. Or are you testing God through your prayers? How often have you heard of people praying for a sign? Or maybe you have prayed for a sign from God. I heard recently about a child saying his mealtime prayers. He ended by saying, and thank you God for these pancakes. Amen. The parents were surprised, and asked why he thanked God for pancakes when they were having chicken casserole? His answer? – I just wanted to check to see if God was paying attention. You don't need to test God with your prayers, don't check to see if He is paying attention. Don't ask God for a sign. If you pray to God seeking protection from temptation – what is the purpose of such protection? If you are protected from temptation, will that bring you honor, will that make you better than others or will you be able to show others that God is the one who deserves the credit and honor? If you come to God seeking forgiveness, what is the purpose of that forgiveness? Is that just to make you feel better, so that you can sin again? Or is it to restore a right relationship between you and God, SO THAT you can live a life of righteousness, and bring honor and glory to God? Even if you pray for health to be restored, what is the purpose? Do you want good health, so that you can simply live without pain, or is there a higher purpose? For example, you might pray for health SO THAT you can serve others, share your joy with others, and praise God?

As you give some thought to Ascension Day, which has already passed, don't be caught up in thinking about what happened, or how, but think about the purpose. Think about Christ ascending to the Father, SO THAT the Holy Spirit may come to us, the Spirit that brings us strength and power, the Spirit that brings us God in action. And let that same seeking after purpose permeate your whole faith life. Give purpose to your faith, your worship and your prayers. Give the highest purpose to your life in Christ. Seek to bring Glory to God, to live in one-ness with Christ and one another, SO THAT the world might see the love of God in you, and in us, and believe, and glorify God. Amen