

PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
ASCENSION SUNDAY
“ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS”
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
May 24, 2009
Mark 16:15-20
10:00 A.M. Service

Our limited understanding often causes us confusion and anxiety. Jesus' ascension represented a tremendous loss to the disciples, and left them disoriented and uncertain about the future. After a period of waiting, however, they would discover that Christ was still with them and that his Spirit would guide them in their continuing mission.

Today we celebrate Christ's ascension into heaven. But we have a dual celebration. We also celebrate the life and love of a former pastor, Paul Murphy. The ascension is given only one sentence in the very succinct Gospel of Mark. The birth of Christ marked a new era in the history of Christianity. Jesus was the beginning of this new redemptive era that ushered in a renewed covenant with God, and a universal mission. His ascension into heaven ended his earthly ministry, but marked the beginning of his church.

The ascension was that time when Jesus visibly departed from his disciples and came into the presence of God the Father. It represented the culmination of his earthly ministry. The ascension was the day of transition, when the Jesus of the earth became the Jesus of heaven.

In other words, the story of Jesus ended that the story of his church could begin. At the end of Jesus' ministry, the temple was still standing in Jerusalem, and Rome still ruled the world. But the temple was utterly destroyed in 70 A.D. Eventually the Roman Empire was divided and sank into anarchy. Meanwhile, the movement of Christianity would be extended in all directions. One story ended and another story began.

Jesus' last words were not about himself. As his earthly story was about to end, he spoke of the story that was about to begin. Without sentimentality

or references to the years he had spent together with his disciples, he spoke to them about their future. Looking ahead, he charged them with a commission: ***“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation.”*** For the most part, Jesus’ ministry up to this point had centered in him, in his actual physical presence. The new story would center in his followers, those he had prepared to continue his ministry to the world. It was time for the regional scope of Christ’s work to be expanded. A world was waiting.

Paul Murphy was a part of that waiting world. It is amazing when one believes what God says. Jesus knew that the emphasis must be on the future and the mission that his church would one day undertake. The early church had no idea what possibilities and challenges awaited them, or what courage and conviction would be required of them. The disciples encountered opposition on all sides, and some of the most bitter came from their own kinsfolk. Some of them were imprisoned, others tortured, and still others put to death. But Jesus had promised them that he would be with them every step of the way in the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Look around you this morning, Park Hill. We are a part of history. History may be seen as one long story, a saga that moves from the dawn of creation out into an unknown future. History may also be seen as a vast collection of short stories, which is the way we learn it. No single human being, no one family, no empire or nation appears in all these stories. Each story ends so that others may begin.

Learning often involves the particular and the universal, the specific and the general. The distinction between the historical Jesus and the cosmic Christ is crucial to our Christian faith. In the human Jesus we encounter an individual person within the limits of time and space. We experience the personal characteristics of a fellow human being. In the cosmic Christ we encounter a pervasive presence that is both within us and beyond us, that is unbounded by time and space, and that is in many ways beyond our comprehension. Yet, both as the human Jesus and the cosmic Christ, he is the same person, the same Lord.

“He ascended into heaven and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.”

The ascension of Christ is the end of his physical presence on earth. But it is the beginning of the missionary expansion of his church throughout the world. In Acts, the last words of Jesus are: ***“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.”*** The ascension is the beginning of the universal Lordship of Christ and the witness of his people, the Church universal. By word and example we are to proclaim the gospel.

“A hymn of glory let us sing; / New hymns throughout the world shall ring; / By a new way none ever trod / Christ mounteth to the throne of God. / Be thou our present joy, Oh Lord, / Who wilt be ever our reward; / And, as the countless ages flee, / May all our glory be in Thee!” (The Venerable Bede)

The word for wind and the word for spirit in Hebrew are the same. Wait on the gift of the Spirit Jesus says to his disciples and the Spirit will empower you. Come; grow your spirit with us. I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.