Acts 1:1-11

Psalm 47

Ephesians 1:15-23

Luke 24:44-53

So these men in white appear and ask, “What are you looking at?” Is this a scene from the deep south during the days of segregation? Or from an old cowboy movie? Perhaps a street performance in Balboa Park? No, it’s one of those “other worldly” experiences that we read about in the Bible…like the scene at the empty tomb on Easter morning, or the angel Gabriel appearing to Mary, or Moses receiving the 10 commandments. The point of these “other worldly” events is to grab our attention, to sharpen our focus, to put us on notice that something truly important has taken place.

The Ascension stories that we heard today are about a moment when we humans experienced Jesus as no longer being restricted or confined to our sense of time or space. Jesus resurrected and Jesus ascended are truly experiences of Jesus as the Christ, Jesus as the one glorified by God, Jesus as existing both within – and yet beyond the world we humans experience. Jesus’ birth, death, resurrection and ascension are fundamentally connected. They are the foundation stones of our faith. We acknowledge their importance every time we recite the creed. Each of our Eucharistic prayers also proclaims these fundamental beliefs. We, the church, profess again and again that we believe in the birth, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. But what does that really mean for us today? Does it make a difference if we don’t believe?

Years ago, at a meeting with the diocesan Commission on Ordained Ministry, that group that has a major say in whether or not someone will be ordained, I was asked to explain Jesus’ resurrection. My answer was – after a brief pause to collect my thoughts – “I can’t explain what happened, but I believe it happened.” The commission member who asked the question responded, “I can’t explain it either, but I just thought I’d ask.” In spite of our rational, data-driven, scientific culture, “I believe” seems to be a much better response to this question than a carefully measured theological explanation or a scientific report trying to make physical sense

out of an “other worldly” experience.

For me, I believe that God raised Jesus from the dead and restored him to his eternal glory.

I can’t fully explain it, but I believe it happened. And perhaps more importantly, I believe that it happened for a reason. God raised Jesus from the dead and brought him back to his heavenly glory, because Jesus had fulfilled his mission on earth. Jesus had completed the work that God had given him to do: to live among we humans as one of us, to show in various and assorted signs the expansiveness of God’s mercy and love, and to call us into a community that loves one another as openly and as totally as God loves us. What mission do you think that God is calling St. John’s to undertake right now? How can we better show the expansiveness of God’s love for everyone? How can we best proclaim Jesus as resurrected and ascended?

Before departing this earthly realm, Jesus charged us to be his witnesses, to do as he did,

to actively participate in God’s mission. We are to love with great compassion, to care deeply for those around us, to be more concerned with principles than with personalities. This is what it means to be a follower of Jesus; to be believers in his birth, death, resurrection and ascension.

We don’t have to be able to explain these events in terms that skeptics, or atheists, or scientists can accept. But we do have to act on our beliefs. We have to live out in our lives what we profess with our lips. And I think that living a life of faith is a bigger challenge for many of us, than is trying to offer any verbal explanation of these great mysteries of our salvation.

Have you ever had that experience of someone coming up to you and asking, “Have you accepted Jesus as your personal savior?” I know that I have. As a child growing up Roman Catholic in a small, very Protestant town in Ohio, I never learned how to answer that question –

only to proclaim that I was a Roman Catholic and then turn and run in the other direction. Years later, I still dreaded that encounter which often was announced by the doorbell ringing – you know, those occasional visits by Jehovah Witnesses or Mormons or 7th Day Adventists. The sound of the doorbell meant that my faith was going to be challenged; no, that my ability to articulate my faith was going to be challenged; no, that my willingness to publicly witness to Jesus was going to be challenged. I had had experiences of sharing my faith one-on-one or in small groups, but to acknowledge it in front of strangers, even though there were usually only two of them, this seemed to be beyond my capacity. I believed, but I didn’t think I had the words to express my beliefs. I believed, but I was afraid to say so publicly. I believed…at least I thought I did. What if I said the wrong thing? What if I couldn’t fully explain myself? What if…what if…what if?

But you know, all it took was the resolve to take the risk, to follow the example of others,

to use the opportunities as they presented themselves. Most of all, it meant that I had to let go of my ego, my need to be in control. I had to cast my anxieties on God, trusting in the power of the Holy Spirit to inspire my words and actions. Trusting in God is not some sentimental, Utopian ideal. It is not the “Don’t Worry, Be Happy” world that Bobby McFerrin sang about back in the 90’s. Trusting in God means acknowledging God’s love for us, God’s care for us. Trusting in God means cooperating with God in God’s great mission of reconciliation. Trusting in God

means changing and being changed into the fullness of Christ, resurrected and ascended.

I want to end this sermon with a paraphrase of today’s reading from the letter to the Ephesians.

“I ask the God of our Master, Jesus Christ, the God of glory—to make you intelligent and discerning in knowing him personally, your eyes focused and clear, so that you can see exactly

what it is he is calling you to do, grasp the immensity of this glorious way of life he has for his followers, the utter extravagance of his work in us who believe in him.” So, let us not stand around looking up into the sky as the disciples did, wondering what to do next. Let us listen to Jesus. Let us allow him to open our minds. Let us be his witnesses to the ends of the earth,

proclaiming in word and especially in action, God’s reconciling love for everyone.