



You are important to God and to us.
Feel free to share your thoughts,
your comments and your
questions at:
alane.miller@att.net

Because of Easter – The Blank Blue Sky

Acts 1:1-10

May 8, 2005

Today is Ascension Sunday. Or more accurately, it is the Sunday before Ascension Thursday. The scriptures tell us that forty days after Jesus rose from the dead on Easter morning he ascended into heaven. In some parts of the Christian church, Ascension Day is celebrated very faithfully every year. That has not been a part of the practice of the Church of the Brethren that most of us have experienced. So what is the significance of Ascension Day? Why did Jesus do it and what does it mean for you and I?

Before looking at those questions more closely, I would like to say that this morning I am continuing the series entitled *Because of Easter*. I did a similar series about ten years ago when I was the pastor of the Shippensburg Church of the Brethren. I decided to do that so after I read about a survey that had been done of Christian believers. When asked if they thought that Easter was important, almost without exception every believer said, "Yes." But when asked to explain why they thought it was important, most were unable to give any good reason. So . . . is Easter important? Intuitively as believers, we know that it is. But why? What difference has Easter really made in how we live our lives?

Pastor Kathy began the series last week, looking at the new life available to us because of Jesus' resurrection. This morning I want to explore why Jesus left? As we look at those questions, I would also add that I am very indebted to Philip Yancey for both the title of this message and a number of the ideas I will use are from a chapter in his book *The Jesus I Never Knew*.

Imagine if you can being a disciple of Jesus in the days surrounding his death, resurrection and ascension. What a roller coaster ride of emotions that must have been. First there is the incredible high of Palm Sunday. This is it. Jesus is finally being recognized for the King he really is. But then horror of horrors, just a few days later he was arrested, given a mockery of a trial and crucified. What a horrible, tragic turn of events. You think he is dead . . . gone . . . lost forever.

Then comes the unbelievable events of the resurrection. Jesus is alive. He is back. The impossible has happened and life will never again, ever be the same. Over the next forty days, you just never know where Jesus is going to pop up next. He appears to the women, to Peter, and to John. He appears to Cleopas and his companion. He appears to ten of disciples as they were eating a meal, then the next evening to the same ten plus Thomas. He appears to the disciples as they are fishing and on another occasion to more than five hundred disciples at one time. (See Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, John 20, 21, & I Corinthians 15: 4-7) That too must have been a whole series of awesome experiences.

But then . . . but then Jesus takes you to a mountain outside of Jerusalem and rising into the air, he leaves you there, alone. Just like that! Would you have been standing looking up into the air with you mouth open? What? Why? What are we supposed to do now?

Do you ever think how nice it would be if Jesus had not left? If he was still here? I mean just think of all the people he could have healed. Just think of all the church arguments that could have been avoided. Wouldn't it be great to appeal to his final authority so we could settle all those disputed passages of scripture. We could even ask him what music he really wants us singing in church . . . or what color the new church carpet should be. And wouldn't it be great if we could use the marvels of today's technology so that people around the world could hear him teach and see his miracles? Wouldn't that be a much more effective way of transmitting the good news?

But that's not what Jesus did. He lived his life, with just a few brief exceptions, in first century Palestine, a small backward province out on the edge of the mighty Roman empire. He left behind no writings, no pictures, and no wife or children. Just a few disciples, who were very, very fallible.

There's an old story that William Barclay tells about Jesus after his ascension having a conversation with the angel Gabriel. Gabriel asked the Lord if everyone on earth knew what he had done for them and how he had suffered for them. Jesus replied, "No, only a few people in Palestine know."

Gabriel asked, "So what have you done to make sure the message gets out?"

Jesus answered, "I have asked Peter and James and John and a few others to make it their life's work to tell others about me, beginning in Jerusalem and passing it along until everyone in the world knows."

Gabriel tried not to be disrespectful, but he said, "Lord, you know how people are! What if they get tired? What if they get discouraged? What if they forget important parts of your teaching? What if years from now the movement dies out for lack of a witness? What other plans have you made?"

Jesus looked down on the earth and said simply, "I have no other plans."

Many have wondered through the years about the wisdom of what Jesus did. It often appears to have been a colossal mistake. We do not have to look very far to discover many examples of unchristian behavior of Christians. I could cite many examples. Let me just give a few.

At one point, the Christian church had three popes, each claiming to be the rightful successor to the throne of Peter . . . each warring against the other. At times during the past twenty centuries Christians have raped, tortured, and murdered not just non-believers, but even each other . . . all in the name of God.

And today, too many Christians carry the reputation for being some of the most angry, judgmental, bitter people around. Yancey describes a scene in one movie where one person tells another "It's just like heaven, only better. There are no Christians."

Sadly, some churches are known more for their church fights, than for any positive contribution they make to building God's kingdom. I have no doubt that many of you would also have your own stories to add.

Of course what we see in the church is but a reflection of what we see in the larger world around. We see wars and rumors of war. We see famine and disease. We see the detestation from hurricanes, tornadoes and tsunamis. As modern writers, philosophers and even some theologians have looked at the misery of human history, they have concluded that God . . . if there ever was a god . . . is no longer concerned with human affairs. If you want the fancy Latin term it is *deus abscondus*. God has absconded. He has escaped. God is in hiding. He has abandoned us. And so . . . we are alone in this very empty, very hostile universe. Alone to somehow muddle along . . . without purpose . . . without guidance, experiencing whatever dismal fate this cold, empty universe might have to offer.

So why did Jesus leave us in this mess? Why didn't he just stay around to tell us what to do? In response, please note that this was part of the plan of God from the beginning. Not long before his crucifixion, Jesus told his disciples (John 16:7)

I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.

It is to your advantage . . . it is for your good . . . it is necessary . . . it is expedient . . . Why? Jesus left the work of kingdom building to his disciples and to us. That was not a mistake. That was part God's plan. Most of us are very familiar with Paul's words to the church at Ephesus (2:8 & 9). Pastor Kathy used them just last Sunday. Those verses are frequently cited as part of God's plan of salvation. They reads:

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.

That part is very true. There is nothing we can do to earn our own salvation. It is *the gift of God*. But I regret that too often we stop with verse 9 and do not read the rest of the thought (vs 10):

For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Do you hear it? Do you believe it? *Doing good works* is part of God's plan for each one of us.

I appreciated Yancy's observation about Matthew 25:31 and following. These verses have long been a favorite of Brethren. But Yancey notes how this story connects and builds on the previous three stories. If you open your Bibles we are going to start with Matthew 24. I'm not going into detail for most of that chapter, other than to say that the early part of the chapter contains sayings of Jesus about the end times.

Then beginning in 24:45 we find the first of three stories that emphasizes the themes of alertness watchfulness and the responsible use of authority. The master goes away and leaves a servant in charge. But the servant doesn't know when the master is returning.

We find a similar theme in the second story (Matthew 25:1ff). The bridegroom is coming. The attendants don't know when but they are to be prepared. Some will be . . . and some will not.

And in the third story, again, it is the master who goes away. But before he does he calls his three servants and gives to each a certain amount of money. He expects them to use it well before his return. Do you see the themes? The master . . . the bridegroom . . . the master is absent. But all three emphasize the themes of alertness watchfulness and the responsible use of authority.

Then we come to the story of the separation of the sheep and the goats. Here we read that the king is *not* absent. The king is present but in disguise. Jesus is present in the person of the poor, the homeless, the sick and the imprisoned. Those who serve the king have done so but have not recognized his presence.

Mother Theresa devoted her life to the poor and the dying on the streets of Calcutta, India. She once said that she and her nuns mediate on Jesus and then go look to the streets to look for him in disguise.

Most of us, at one time in our lives have been students. For many of us that was in a formal classroom setting. For some of us, that was through some type of apprentice program. Do you remember those training day? Do you also remember when the time came that you were supposed to use what you had learned. Perhaps you were trained as a nurse and this was your first time to look after you own patients. Perhaps it was the first time when you were left alone to mind the store. Perhaps it was bringing that first little baby home from the hospital. Perhaps it was the time when you were allowed to drive the big truck all by yourself.

Do you remember your feelings? For most of us it varied somewhere between over-confidence and sheer panic. Sure, I've got this all under control . . . no problem . . . don't worry . . . whoops! Hey! Now what do I do? From the beginning, part of God's plan was that you and I would be instrumental in building the kingdom of God. Does that scare you?

There is still one more thought that I want to mention from John 16:7:

I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.

It is to our advantage that Jesus leave because when he did, we would experience the presence of the Holy Spirit. That's the message for next week, and I'm not going to preach two messages this morning. But I do want to say, as we allow the Spirit of God to guide and direct our steps, we will see God working in and through us that is an awesome experience.

Our recent Disaster Response trip again reminded me how many benefits I have seen as persons give a week of their lives toward showing God's love to others. Yes, one purpose of the trip is helping others. But over and over again, I have been changed and I have seen other

people changed in the process. God is present. God is at work. It's almost a magical week. Somehow you almost wish that you could bottle that week and keep those thoughts and feelings forever. Of course we can't. But we can rely on God's presence and God's direction for each day. As we do, we can be confident that the best is still to come.