

First Presbyterian Church
Greenfield, Indiana
Pastor John J. Paulson
June 5, 2011 Ascension Sunday
Gone, but coming back!

Acts 1:1-11	Jesus will return!
Psalm 47	God is awesome!
Ephesians 1:15-23	Get to know God better!
Luke 24:44-53	Jesus returns to God

Informally before the sermon: Sometimes saying goodbye is very difficult.

Particularly when you love the people you are leaving behind, and have no idea when you might return to see them again. I can hardly count the number of times in my Navy career that Pat and I had to say “good bye” to people we had become really close to. It happened just about every three years when a new set of orders appeared from Washington. There were usually farewell parties and lots of promises to keep in contact; promises that we always meant to stick to, but after a Christmas card or two, they faded away.

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O LORD, our Rock and our Redeemer! Amen

That’s the situation that Jesus was in as he lead his disciples out of Jerusalem to the vicinity of Bethany. Walking along the dusty road Jesus knew it he had this one last opportunity to talk to his closest followers. It was time to say goodbye. He knew what was about to happen, but his disciples didn’t. Did he have one more surprise for these dedicated men and women who had been with him through the best of times and the worst of times.

He had had many surprises for them. For those who spent time with Jesus and walked along with him as he preached and taught those many years ago, the unexpected had become a way of life. Jesus was full of surprises; his closest followers found that out time after time that they had to be prepared for just about anything from satisfying their hunger by picking grain and eating it as they walked through a field on the Sabbath, to providing lunch for five thousand strangers on a hillside in the middle of nowhere. One night after they had spent the entire night fishing and caught nothing, Jesus told them to try once more, and they caught more fish than the nets could hold. Once they thought they saw a ghost walking on water, and it turned out to be Jesus! Another time they saw

someone cooking breakfast on the shore, and lo and behold, it was Jesus cooking some fish for them.

Would we, or they, expect this day to be any different? Jesus had been with them for forty days since that first Easter morning surprise. They had met many times, shared stories and meals together, and Jesus talked to them about the future. However, it appears that although they listened, they didn't understand very much of what he was saying.

As they walked along, they asked him again, for maybe the umpteenth time, if this was the time he is going to restore the kingdom of Israel. They had been waiting expectantly. Waiting; they waited during the three years of Jesus' ministry, for something earthshaking to happen. It didn't. Jesus wasn't doing what they expected him to. Instead of overthrowing the Romans, he healed lepers; instead of supporting the religious leaders, he was throwing the money changers out of the temple; instead of surrounding himself with the religious elite, he surrounded himself with fishermen and tax collectors. Instead of declaring himself "king" after entering Jerusalem, he went on trial and was convicted and was executed and died. Then, in the biggest surprise of all, and it really was earthshaking, he came back from the dead and joined them once more. Now that he was back, and had been with them for forty days or so, they really expected big things to happen. They were ready. Ready to move! "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel? Lord, is this going to finally be the day?"

They must have expected Jesus to say, "Yes", or they wouldn't have asked. If this wasn't going to be the day, they must at least expect Jesus to tell them when it will happen.

But, Jesus surprises them once more.

First, he tells them that that they are not supposed to know the times or the dates for things that only God knows.

Then he tells them that they shouldn't worry about it anyway. He tells them that they have work to do; plenty of work to do before God's plan is fulfilled.

He tells them once again that something called the Holy Spirit will come to help them on their mission, and give them power.

Then he outlines the mission, and it is a big one. You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

As they heard this, I'm sure they looked at each other in wonderment. What did he mean; Jerusalem they could understand; even Judea was OK. But Samaria? They

shouldn't even have anything to do with the Samaritans. What kind of a witness could they be to them? And to the ends of the earth! Well, there are only eleven of them officially as well as the women who were with them; how could they witness for Jesus to the ends of the earth. Maybe they heard him wrong. Maybe he really said "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and someone else will take care of all Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

The were filled with questions. They wanted answers. They were not ready to be on their own. They weren't really sure what this "Holy Spirit" was all about that Jesus had promised. When would it come?

It reminds me of the pictures of wives saying good bye to their husbands or boy friends as the Navy aircraft carrier pulls away from the pier in San Diego heading for the Mideast. Can you hear them yelling, those last minute questions. "What do I do if the car won't start?" or "is there any money in the bank," "when will you be back?"

Peter probably would have been the likely one to ask Jesus what he really expected of them, but, before any of them could ask, Jesus was whisked away from them, and that was the last they saw of him. Jesus is gone.

This is one last surprise that Jesus has for them!

Two angels come and tell them that he will return, but not when.

What now? It is pretty clear that they are not to stand around looking up, waiting for Jesus to return. Jesus told them that, and the angels told them too.

Of course that message wasn't meant only for those eleven or so people standing there saying goodbye to Jesus; it was, and is, meant for everyone of us who also are Jesus' followers. We have been called to continue the mission of Christ. The mission of changing the world and offering everyone the opportunity for the good life, for the good life in Christ. We are the body of Christ in the world today. We are Christ's hands, feet, heart, eyes and voice. We have the Spirit empowering us to do great things in our world.

We know Jesus is coming back, we just don't know when. It could be today or tomorrow or in five hundred years.

The money we raised at the Strawberry Festival Friday is one way we carry out Christ's mission for us. Those dollars will help many in our community receive needed assistance and feel the love of Christ in their lives. Our mission donations to the Presbyterian Church reach all over the world helping those who are struggling. Our

prayers continue to let God know that we are carrying out our mission and not sitting around with our heads in the clouds wondering what to do while we wait for Jesus to return. We are ready, we are able, we are doing. We will be ready when Jesus returns.

But, will we recognize him?

The 200-year-old church was being readied for an anniversary celebration when calamity struck: the bell ringer was called out of town. The priest immediately advertised for another.

When the replacement arrived, the priest took him to the steps leading to the bell tower, some 150 feet above them. Round and round they went, huffing and puffing all the way. Just as they reached the landing, the bell ringer tripped and fell face-first into the biggest bell of all. Bo-o-o-o-ong!

Dazed by the blow, the bell ringer stumbled backward onto the landing. The railing broke loose and he fell to the ground. Miraculously, he was unhurt—only stunned—but the priest thought it best to call an ambulance.

“Who are you?” the doctor asked the man.

“I don’t know,” the man replied.

“Do you know this man’s name?” the doctor asked the priest.

“No,” the priest replied, “but his face sure rings a bell.”

AMEN