



SUNDAY SERMON

Tell Me the Truth About Love

Loving God, set us apart for truth; let our lives speak the truth of your word.
Amen.

Friends, I have a story to tell you. Something amazing happened this past Thursday, something you're not going to believe. It's now--what?--seven Sundays I think since we heard that our teacher Jesus was raised from the dead. I know not all of us have seen him, but we've all heard the stories: Mary Magdalene found his tomb empty that Sunday morning after the passover, and then she saw him in the garden. At least, she said it was his voice, and it looked like him, but he was different too--like light was coming through him.

And then that afternoon there were those guys--I can't remember who it was--but they said they saw him on the road when they were walking to Emmaus. They didn't recognize him at first. But then he came into the house and sat down to eat supper with them and he lifted up the bread and broke it, just the same way he always did, and suddenly they knew it was him.

And of course we know that Thomas actually touched him, put his fingers right into the spear wound on his side. So we know that he's been here, with us, this whole time. Even though we thought he was dead.

But here's the crazy thing, and I know it's going to be hard to believe, might even be a little bit hard to hear, because I think maybe he's not going to be with us like that anymore. Maybe it's going to be harder to see him now. Because what I hear is that this past Thursday, Jesus took the inner circle out to Bethany--just outside the city, you know, it's the house where Mary and Martha live, oh and their brother Lazarus too, since he's alive again--and Jesus told them the time had come, and that they should remember and keep telling all the people in Jerusalem and all around the good news he taught us.

And then he raised his hands and blessed them. And while he was blessing them, he was carried up into heaven. Gone, disappeared, just like that. And now we're alone. Well--before he left he promised to send us "power from on high." Those were his words. But who knows what that means?

Thanks everyone for indulging my little dramatic monologue there. I guess I could have just told you that last Thursday, forty days after Easter, was the feast of the Ascension, when Jesus ascended into heaven and left his disciples in Jerusalem to wait on the coming of the Holy Spirit. But I thought it would be more fun to act it out. Today, the seventh Sunday after Easter we are left in a weird, in-between sort of place: Jesus is now gone, really gone for good this time, but the Holy Spirit hasn't yet come. That doesn't happen until 50 days after Easter, which will be next Sunday.

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DATE

Seventh Sunday of Easter
Sunday, May.13, 2018

PREACHER

The Rev. Jason Cox

VERSE

John 17:6-19

It's tempting to ignore the story of the ascension altogether, especially in this fake news, post-truth world we are currently living in. I don't want to muddy the water any further about what's real and what's not. I believe in science and math and I'm not inclined to argue for the plausibility of such an obviously childish story when it's set against the incontrovertible facts we know to be true about how the world works: The earth is not flat. Heaven is not the realm above our heads, just beyond the clouds. There's no point in having Jesus float up, up and away like that.

But maybe there's another possibility. Maybe this story--and all the other implausible stories that fill the bible--maybe they're not there in eternal opposition to the facts, the math, the truth that science has revealed to us about quantum mechanics and general relativity and molecular biology and so on. Maybe taking these stories literally misses the point altogether. These stories are trying to point us toward something bigger than themselves, toward meaning, toward Truth with a capital T. And truth isn't an easy thing to tell in the world we live in.

I was reading some political commentary this week and came across this summary of how "truth" operates in the political realm:

"Seen from the viewpoint of politics, truth has a despotic character. [Truth] is therefore hated by tyrants, who rightly fear the competition of a coercive force they cannot monopolize, . . . Unwelcome opinion can be argued with, rejected, or compromised upon, but unwelcome facts possess an infuriating stubbornness that nothing can move except plain lies."

Listen to that again: tyrants hate facts--hate the truth--because it can't be controlled and bent to their whim. The tyrant's only option in the face of facts is outright lies.

So wrote Hannah Arendt. In *The New Yorker*. In February 1967. Because I guess politics never really changes, huh? She goes on:

"Where everybody lies about everything of importance, the truth-teller, whether he knows it or not, has begun to act; he, too, has engaged himself in political business, for, in the unlikely event that he survives, he has made a start toward changing the world."

In the unlikely event that he survives--telling the truth. Insisting upon the truth, see, is a good way to get yourself killed. Because the people at the top don't really want to hear the truth.

Jesus knew all about that. He knew that telling the truth about what the way the Roman Empire was oppressing his people would be dangerous. He knew that overturning the money-changing tables in the temple so he could talk about economic inequality would not endear him to the temple leadership. But he told those truths anyway. The speech we heard Jesus give in the Gospel today actually comes on Maundy Thursday, just before his final confrontation with the authorities.

His final prayer for his disciples is this: "They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth."

To sanctify something is to set it apart, make it special, different. Holy. Jesus' most fervent hope for us is that we open up our eyes and ears so that we can see the truth, and hear the truth, and love the truth, and live for the truth. No matter what lies the world may tell, we are set apart for truth.

So . . . what truth is the story about Jesus' ascension trying to tell us? Well it's interesting to me that Jesus leads his disciples out to Bethany to say their final good-byes. Jesus hung out in Bethany a lot, in fact--it was always where he stayed when he came into the city. His friends Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus had a house there.

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Bethany wasn't a very nice neighborhood though. It was just outside of the city, just out of sight of the temple in fact. The name Bethany translates to something like "the house of affliction." It was where the city of Jerusalem sent people who were poor or sick. There was a homeless shelter there, and a leper hospital. Bethany was built out of sight of the temple so those coming in to worship wouldn't have to see all that ugliness, that poverty and desperation.

And that's where Jesus chose to spend most of his time. These are the people Jesus chose to spend time with. He poured out his life in love for them. And that is the last place on earth Jesus chose to be seen, among the poor and the suffering. And he goes from that house of affliction into every place and time, carrying in his heart the cares and concerns of all the poor people of the earth.

And now he surrounds and infiltrates all times and all places with the beating heart of this truth, sometimes hidden just under the surface, but always there, if you're willing to face it: Real love costs everything you have, and it's the only thing that matters.

Amen.