



Sermon of May 16, 1999



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"STAY IN THE CITY"

Ephesians 1:15-23

Luke 24:44-53

The Church's holy days were established to teach the faith. A special day, especially if it is marked with decoration and celebration, a festival, is a wonderful way to learn. Christmas and Easter, of course, are the best examples. Those two holy days teach the major doctrines of our faith: the Incarnation, and the Crucifixion-Resurrection.

But there are others, such as Ascension, Pentecost, and Trinity, which come in rapid succession this time of year, one right after another. Each one celebrates an important and distinctive feature of the Christian faith. This Sunday is Ascension Sunday, so we will look at that doctrine using the gospel lesson for this morning, Luke's description of that event.

According to Luke, Jesus appeared to his disciples during the forty days following the

Resurrection. On the fortieth day he gathered them at the Mount of Olives, told them, "Stay in the city, until you receive power from on high." Then he disappeared into the heavens, he ascended, to be "at the right hand of God the Father."

Some people look upon the Ascension as a rather impressive bit of aeronautics. Jesus, the first astronaut, "rocket man," or something like that.

When Jean and I were in Germany a few years ago, we visited a little town called Eisleben, in eastern Germany, where Martin Luther was born. It is a lovely little village. On top of the hill, above the town, there is an old medieval church. In Luther's day it was Roman Catholic, but today, of course, it is a Lutheran Church. Inside the church, a glorious pulpit, biblical scenes in carved wood.

One of the biblical scenes is the Ascension. It shows a rock at the bottom of the carving, with two footprints in the rock. The disciples are gathered around the rock praying, their eyes lifted up toward heaven. At the top of the carving there is a cloud, and two big, old feet sticking out of the cloud. Those are Jesus' feet as he ascended through the clouds and into the heavens.

It's a wonderful carving. I took a picture of it. It is beautiful, medieval folk art, but it is terrible theology. If that is all that the Ascension means, that Jesus, "rocket man," disappeared into the clouds, then we have missed the whole point of the Ascension. Because what the Church talked about when it talked about the Ascension of our Lord into heaven, was not aerospace. What they were talking about was politics. What they were talking about was power.

Which is seen clearly in the epistle lesson that was read to us this morning from Ephesians. Paul tells the Ephesians, "You have power now." He is talking to a little handful of Christians, many of whom were slaves in that society, and the great majority of the lower class, unimportant people. Just a small number compared to the rest. "You have power now," he says.

He is talking politically. He means that you can change things in Ephesus. That is what power means. That is a good definition of political power. Political power is the ability to make things happen. Listen to Paul as he addresses the Ephesians. "You have immeasurable power if you believe. God put this power to work in the world when he raised Christ from the dead, and seated him at his right hand in the heavens, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, both in this age and the age to come."

That is a political announcement. It is an announcement of who is in charge, who has the power. God put this power to work in the world when he raised Jesus from the dead, and seated him at his right hand. That means that at the Resurrection, and at the Ascension, a new age began in this world. There was a power set loose in this world, the power of resurrection, the power of new life, the power that we saw in Jesus Christ. So Luke says, "Stay in the city, until you receive this power from on high."

I have always been fascinated with that command, "Stay in the city." Why did he say that? Then it occurred to me, cities are the centers of power. Societies are controlled from the cities. So if Christians are going to change things in this world, then "stay in the city."

And they did. Christianity, from the very beginning, was an urban movement. Apparently it made a bee line from Pentecost in Jerusalem, to Rome, to establish a church in Rome. Rome, the center of power. Rome, the eternal city. Rome, the capital of the world, the most powerful city in the world. The first thing the Christians did was establish a church in Rome. It would be like a little fly on the elephant's hide; an outrageous thing to do. This little community of Christians going immediately to Rome to claim Jesus is resurrected, sits at the right hand of God the Father, so "the kingdoms of this world," they said, "have become the Kingdoms of our Christ," including Rome. It was audacious. "Stay in the city, until you receive power."

The power came at Pentecost, which we will celebrate next week, when the Spirit came upon the disciples like the rush of a mighty wind. The disciples were emboldened and empowered to be shakers and movers in all the cities of the world.

That happened in a remarkable history. It is just amazing. In Philippi, which is in Macedonia, which incidentally is in the news now because it is one of the former parts of Yugoslavia. Macedonians, as you know, won't let the Kosovars come in as refugees. It is a terrible, tragic situation. Paul was there 2000 years ago in Macedonia, in Philippi, walking down the street of the city. A deranged slave girl confronted him. Probably much the same way that people in the downtown areas of all the cities of this country will confront you. Only this child was a slave. Because of her hallucinations, people believed that she had powers of divination. They said she was a sorceress. They were making money off her. She must have been like a monkey, tied with a strap to the organ grinder, on the streets, confronting people, shouting at people.

She confronted Paul. Paul, moved by compassion, healed her. All of a sudden sane, she was no longer of any use to her owners. Paul ended the exploitation of a child. He was thrown in jail. The charge against him, "These people are disturbing our city."

The same thing happened in Ephesus. The main business of Ephesus was the Temple of Artemis. Artemis was the goddess of fertility. In Rome she was known as Diana. Her Greek name was Artemis. Artemis was the business of Ephesus. Many of you have been there. You can see the great street that goes up from the water to the Temple of Artemis. Ephesus was filled with prostitutes associated with the Temple, and with merchants who made their living off the Temple, selling little statues of Artemis to the pilgrims who came to the city.

Paul went to Ephesus. He timed it during the Festival of Artemis. He began converting the Ephesians, telling them, as Christians we cannot participate in idolatry or sexual immorality. As a result, he was dragged before the magistrates with the charge of, "They are ruining our city."

In Thessalonica the classic charge brought against the Christians was, "They are turning the world upside down." It is amazing. This little band of Christians, turning the world upside down.

How did they do it? They did it with "power from on high." They made things happen. Which means they had political power. But it was not worldly power. They had no worldly power. They had political power in the sense that they could make things happen, they could change the way society does its business. They received "power from on high," spiritual power.

But that would change. After a while the Church inherited the Roman Empire in the 4th century.

It crawled into the shell of Rome, like a hermit crab, and the Church became a worldly power, just like every other worldly power. Ever since then, the assumption of many is that if the Church doesn't rule society and have the armies of society to back up its rules, then it is powerless to do anything in this world. It can't do anything.

But the fact of the matter is that the more the Church wielded worldly power, the weaker it was, the less Christian it became. And the less worldly power it had, the weaker it was in the eyes of the world, the more effective it was, and the more Christian it was. When it was weak, all it had was the "power from on high," spiritual power.

Armed with that, do you know what they did? They took care of the poor. They housed the homeless. They fed the hungry. They rescued abandoned children. Children were often abandoned on the streets of the ancient world. The Christians took them in. They cared for the sick, especially lepers, and all those in any age whose sicknesses ostracized them from society. They were hospitable to strangers. They were forgiving of enemies. They were advocates of peace. They refused to participate in activities that dehumanized life. They were faithful in those activities that would enrich life, especially worship. Through their public worship as a witness to the community, they said God is real, God loves us as his children, and calls us to lead a life that is worthy of our birthright as heirs of eternal life through Jesus Christ.

That is how they did it. Just a handful of them, who stayed in the city and received power to live a different kind of life, a life that attracted others to the Church.

Then I asked myself, is it too naive to assume that the Church could do that today? Do you think that it will ever be said again of Christians, "They are turning the world upside down"?

Well they did it then with simple acts of kindness and compassion and integrity. If they were challenged, or if they were arrested, which happened frequently, not only in the first century but also in the 20th century, the Christians always met that challenge with courage, restraint, and love, as evidenced in our century in the American South, with the Civil Rights Movement, and in South Africa, with the liberation of blacks from Apartheid. Two permanent revolutions in this world done without violence.

It started 2000 years ago with simple acts of love and decency. What Stephen Carter of Harvard calls, "acts of civility." And he says they are no small thing. The most important ingredient for a democracy to work is civility, good manners, treating one another with respect. He recalls that when he was raised in his home, his parents taught him to have good manners, because, they said, that is the way you respected the dignity of other people. He recalls when he was growing up the friendliness of neighbors, the hospitality and kindness that was extended to strangers. It is as simple, he said, as saying hello to a stranger. Or driving on the freeways with courtesy. Or being generous to those who disagree with you, and allowing that they are as well-intentioned as you are. Or forgiving those who have insulted you, or abused you, or in some way have brought harm to you.

As a matter of fact, Mayor Guiliani, in New York, has initiated a campaign to bring civility in New York City. Which is kind of like getting lions to stop eating meat. But he succeeded, evidently, to a certain degree. He says that the diminishment of street crime in New York is due

to the reinstitution of civility in the city.

We could start there, at least, with civility. It is no small matter. Civility will transform a society, start to turn a city into a community, where we are concerned about everybody, and where we follow Jesus' command to love our neighbors, to take it seriously.

A nurse in training went to one of her classes one day. The professor announced that there would be a pop quiz. She breezed through the questions, until she came to the last question. The last question was this: "What is the first name of the woman who cleans this building?"

She thought it must be some kind of a joke. Whoever heard of that kind of a question on a test? She had seen the cleaning woman. She could describe her physically, but why should she know her name?

She handed in her test, leaving the last question unanswered. She asked the professor, "Are you going to count that last question on the final score?" "Absolutely," said the professor, "In your careers you are going to meet many people. Each one is significant. Each person deserves your attention and care, even if all you do is smile and say hello."

Civility. Start with the simplest things. Civility. See what happens.

Today the news is about another worldly power, the most powerful nation in history, aligned now with other powerful nations. The most powerful force the world has ever seen, more powerful than Rome, seeking to change things with bombs. NATO has sent something like 5000 bombing missions trying to get a change. Nothing has happened, except to deeply entrench those people who are the victims of the bombing.

There is a historian named Ramsey McMullen. He has written a book entitled, *The Christianizing of the Roman Empire*. It was an attempt to write a secular history of the early Christian movement. He points out that for the first 250 years, from Paul to Constantine, Christianity grew because of the witness of Christians. After Paul, he said, there was no Church mission, no strategy, no organization to win nonChristians to Christ. Everything was left to the individual Christians in their encounter with the world. As a result, he said, Christianity gained one-half million converts every generation, for 250 years.

Where is the power?

1 From Buzz Stevens

*Help us to be masters of ourselves,
that we might be servants of others,
through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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