

A Homily by
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“What does it mean to be church?”
Ascension Day 2021
Acts 1:1-11
Ephesians 1:15-23
Luke 24:44-53

The Ascension of the Lord marked the beginning of the Christian Church. After the risen Christ was taken up to heaven – then those whom Jesus had chosen began to worship him. Yes, they had been chosen, to walk with Jesus, to learn from him, and now to worship him – to found the church. In the Acts of the Apostles – beginning with the Ascension – Luke tells the story of the beginning of the church. The church spread from Jerusalem to all of Palestine and eventually through Paul and his ministry to Greece and other parts of the Mediterranean. Throughout much of the Roman Empire the church took hold.

Jesus first equipped the apostles to teach and heal, to be his hands in the world. And through apostolic succession we have the church here in the 21st century, still alive, still spreading the good news of Jesus Christ to the world through worshipping in God's churches.

What does it mean to be church? From Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus we know that God made Christ the head over all things for the church. And the church is to be the body – a body that fulfills Christ in this world. Christ was and is the complete embodiment of God. And God is still making all things good, through Jesus Christ. And so, it is through the church – with Christ Jesus as the head of the church– so that God's goodness is made known in the world.

Luke's Gospel reading for the Ascension follows on the heels of two very formative stories for the founders of the church. The risen Jesus had appeared to Cleopas and two other followers on the road and then when they shared a meal. Jesus then met them on the beach and cooked broiled fish for breakfast for them and ate with them. Their risen Lord was real. The resurrection was true, just as he had promised.

Jesus reminded them one last time that they were witnesses to all these things. He assured them that the Holy Spirit would come to be with them. And then he led them out to Bethany, a small village just one and a half miles east of Jerusalem on the south-eastern slope of the Mount of Olives.¹

Imagine with me their conversation as they walked with Jesus recalling their work together to further God's kingdom – how they made God's goodness known. When they had arrived in Bethany Jesus lifted up his hands and blessed them. And as he was blessing them he was carried up into heaven. It was then that his followers learned to worship him. Heretofore he was their friend, their teacher, their friend. They had feared the time when he would leave them. They had expressed their sadness. But now that he had ascended they worshipped him. And they went back to Jerusalem and worshipped him publicly in the Temple. They blessed God by their worship. They made God known through telling the stories of Jesus's work. In the old stories of the God of Torah in the Old Testament and the new stories of Jesus, the story of God's son became melded together for believers. And that is church, my friends. The Christian church is formed of that bond of the old and the new. We are called to be the body of Christ in this church formed from the old and remade by the new. We are called to witness to God's goodness. And we are called to make the church alive and new for future Christians.

Lord, may it be so. Amen.

¹ There is such irony that on their way to Bethany they passed right by the Mount of Olives where Jesus often went to rest at the end of the day – and the Garden of Gethsemane at the foot of the Mount of Olives where Jesus went on the night of his betrayal.