

**June 2, 2019 Ascension**  
**Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope**

**Acts 1:1-11, Psalm 47**  
**Ephesians 1:15-23, Luke 24:44-53**

**Grace and peace, courage and wisdom, to you, beloved of Christ. Amen.**

**You will be my witnesses. That's what Jesus says.**

Let me tell you about a conversation this week.

I was at a meeting, a church related meeting, with folks from many congregations.

A mom in the group was sharing about bullying happening in their local school, bullying related to race.

In response, she had started showing up at school board meetings, and was asking leaders from her congregation and other congregations to attend.

At one point in the conversation, as we reflected on these incidents, someone asked her,

"How is your faith involved in this?"

"How is your response, your power, your leadership, connected to your faith?"

I think the person who asked the question assumed, like I did, that she'd say, "Oh, my faith is at the center, I'm doing this as a way to live out my faith, to live out the love that Jesus taught me."

But instead, she said, "It's not connected."

"This isn't about my faith, it's just about the bullying and the need for equity."

Wow, that's not what I expected her to say.

Whether it was semantics, or just another way of thinking about faith, she got me pondering.

**As the meeting ended, this woman and I walked out together.**

We were talking about her congregation and her pastor and the youth director

who she'd boldly invited into conversation with the school board of this suburban district.

She explained how *they'd* do this from *their* faith, "they'd do evangelism, invite people and things."

I commented how I go to the capital to advocate for drivers licenses for immigrants,

or to city hall to speak up for housing, or wherever.

Sometimes, I am inviting people to come to church, but always I am acting and speaking out of my faith.

I go because that's what the-Jesus-who-I-know would have us do:

I think he'd have us show up in love, listen with humility, ask hard questions, welcome the least of these.

I show up because of my faith, because of Jesus.

**"You will be my witnesses,"** Jesus says essential that, twice in our readings: You will be my witnesses.

We're celebrating the Ascension today.

If you are watching closely, you know that we're a few days late:

Ascension was actually Thursday, the 40<sup>th</sup> day after Easter, but it's important so we're hearing it today.

**We heard the story of the Ascension in two parts this morning.**

The gospel that I read is the very conclusion of Luke's Gospel.

It gives us a glimpse of those 40 days after Jesus was resurrected.

The risen Jesus has shown up on the road to Emmaus.

He's come down by the sea to eat fish.

He's opened the scripture and blessed them.

And, finally, he's declared them witnesses and disappeared into some sort of cloud.

The sequel to Luke's Gospel is the book of Acts, the start of which Yesenia read for us today.

Acts begins as Jesus reminds them they are witnesses and then is taken up into heaven (wherever precisely that is).

The Pentecost story of the Holy Spirit follows, we'll hear it next week.

**Both of these accounts of the Ascension make my neck hurt.**

All that the disciples had been through, the politics, the grief, the tension,

and now, finally, Jesus will no longer be with them in physical form.

As Jesus ascends they are left standing around, craning their necks, probably squinting, perhaps crying.

The verb in the Greek could actually be translated not simply looking up or gazing, but gawking.

Their necks must have hurt, but how could you NOT gawk?

How could you not stare into the sky as your teacher, your Savior, is taken up?

**All that gawking and the two men in robes are there, beside them asking, "Why do you look up?"**

Essentially, you're looking in the wrong place, look around, "Be my witnesses," Jesus said.

As I've pondered that conversation with the woman about the school board, I've been thinking about how we do precisely that: how we look around, how we are witnesses.

I don't know how you'd answer that question about faith, and how your faith goes with you to the school board meeting, or into to your office, or to the classroom, or the bedside, or to your kitchen table.

Spend some time chewing on that this week.

I don't expect you to make big public proclamations or invite everyone you meet to church.

I value your sensitivity for the complexity.

But, honestly, I pray that your faith grounds everything that you do, that it goes with you everywhere you go...to the mundane, daily tasks, and to the courageous decisions, and to the labors of love, that Jesus is at the heart of what you do, and why... **for you are witnesses.**

Sometimes you say that out loud, and always you carry it within.

**Last Sunday we discovered** that our bread oven had been tagged with blue graffiti.

Graffiti happens, and the church isn't immune, but, we'd worked hard, and it felt like a violation.

We took the required pictures and prepared to let the police know.

I didn't expect that on Tuesday morning four of the students from PEASE Academy would show up in the church office to tell us who did it:

a young man who'd dropped out of PEASE some months back, who is using, who is struggling...a lot.

PEASE is the recovery high school that has lived here at Hope for 30 years now.

The students are all in recovery.

They've been to treatment and they come to PEASE to finish high school,

and to do that in a setting where they can find support for their sobriety and mental health.

Michael Durchslag, PEASE's director, told us how in their using, students get the narrative: don't be a nark, don't be a snitch.

But these four, in their sobriety, had changed the narrative:

"This is our school. This is our place. We know who did this. How can we help?"

The students, and also Michael, explained how this fellow's behavior is escalating, how he needs help, and how, in this case, help looks like pressing charges with the police.

That's his best chance for an intervention.

I don't know what'll happen, but we'll push for the charges, we'll be witnesses.

But those gutsy PEASE students, who first dared to speak up, they are the witnesses I'm watching.

They've claimed PEASE and Hope and this sober community in a powerful way.

**"Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?"**

That's the question the two in robes ask the disciples in today's story: "Why do you stand looking up?"

You are my witnesses, look around.

**The Ascension is actually** at the heart of a debate that went on some 500 years ago in the Reformation.

It was our namesake Martin Luther who declared that because Jesus ascended and joined with God, then the risen Christ is ubiquitous,

then he's everywhere: in the bread and wine, in the waters of baptism, in the community itself, infused, in, with, and under, we say, then Jesus is infused in us, we're Christ's body.

**Look around, they said, look around, be my witnesses.**

The Dinkytown Farmers Market will open on June 12<sup>th</sup>, in a week and a half.

A few years ago when we began to hear about food insecurity and hunger on campus,

I remember wondering what room we could use for a foodshelf.

Then the Spirit got a little more creative, a little more out there, a little more interesting, and a Farmers Market became our response.

On Wednesdays from 4-7pm our parking lot becomes a mini farmers market:

veggies and jams, sometimes flowers, are sold, SNAP, like food stamps, is accepted, members and neighbors and friends chat, music rises, often the bread oven crews will serve up fresh hot pizza.

We certainly invite people into the community here at Hope, we don't hide that we're a church,

But we do this from our faith, we are witnesses, looking around, in a deeper way:

seeing the hunger of stomachs and the hunger for community, doing like Jesus, meeting people in their need, sensing their God-given gifts, being witnesses.

**Look around**, that is where the Spirit of Jesus and the community of Christ are on the move, look around.

Look closely at the beauty, the possibilities,

and look just as closely at the hurt, the injustice, the quiet pain in another's eyes.

Look beyond yourself, but look, too, at your own life: the places where you feel good and on and balanced, and the broken, ragged places where you cry for Christ's healing and for the Spirit's hope.

Will we simply crane our necks, eyes on heaven,

or will the power and promise of Jesus' Ascension be our call to look around, attentive, clear-eyed, faithful?

Will we trust the power of the Spirit that is already at work in us and so far beyond us?

**You are my witnesses, Jesus says, look around.**

**Amen.**