

“Judea, Samaria, and to the Ends of the Earth”

Acts of the Apostles 1.1–11

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 20 May 2007

Today, we mark the Ascension of Jesus, when the post-resurrection Christ left the disciples. It’s a rather odd story in some ways, with Jesus disappearing into the sky. Imagine what you see when you let go of a helium-filled balloon...it just floats up into the clouds, and then it’s gone.

One of the best brief explanations of this seemingly bizarre account comes from Marcus Borg, who writes, “First, Ascension Day proclaims the lordship of Christ. To say that the risen and ascended Jesus is ‘at God’s right hand,’ a position of honor and authority, means ‘Jesus is Lord.’ In the first century, when kings and emperors claimed to be lords, this claim had not only religious but also political meaning. To say ‘Jesus is Lord’ meant, and means, that the Herods and Caesars of this world were not, and are not.

“Second, because the risen and ascended Jesus is ‘one with God,’ he...can be experienced anywhere. Jesus is no longer restricted or confined to time and space, as he was during his historical lifetime. Rather, like the God whom he knew in his own experience, he continues to be known in the experience of his followers. To use language from Matthew’s Gospel, for Christians the risen and ascended Christ is Immanuel – ‘God with us.’”¹

For me, as a Christian 20 centuries later, it is helpful to have that kind of historical context. It makes the Ascension meaningful as a symbol of the lordship of Christ and the diminished position of “the Herods and Caesars of this world.”



Going back to the story, I wonder if you can imagine yourself as one of the disciples. Try to envision this: you are standing around in Jerusalem with Jesus, who has been resurrected and among you for a month or so, and then – poof! – he’s gone. What are you feeling? You’ve been through the anguish of the crucifixion and you’ve been amazed at the resurrection. And though it isn’t detailed in scripture, you can bet the disciples who were “left behind” felt a great deal of confusion about when Jesus would be back and what to do next. But, Jesus did leave them with marching orders, saying that “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” And those are the last words he speaks to them on earth.

Later in the first chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, the author (who also wrote Luke’s gospel) says that Jesus’ followers numbered 120 (not a coincidence that the number is the biblical 40 times three). But imagine the followers of Christ growing from a less than one-third of the number of people who attend Plymouth on an average Sunday to the 2.1 billion Christians around the world. One-third of the earth’s population claims to Christianity as their faith. (Just for comparison, 21% claim Islam, 16% are non-religious, 14% are Hindu, 6% are Buddhist, and only 2/10s of 1% are Jewish.)²

So, at first glance, we seem to have done a pretty good job of being witnesses to “Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth.”

I wonder...I wonder what that means in our context as members of an open and affirming, peace with justice congregation of the United Church of Christ in Fort Collins, Colorado. What does it mean for us to be witnesses of Christ in our context?

¹ Marcus Borg on beliefnet.com

² statistics from adherents.com

In her benediction last Sunday, Sharon quoted St. Francis of Assisi, who said, “Preach the gospel at all times. And when necessary, use words.” I’d like to think that St. Francis would have been UCC given the option. :)

Look at the first page in your bulletin for a moment, up in the masthead, and take a good look at the UCC crest. In the middle you will see a figure called “the cross triumphant,” which sounds pretty non-UCC. At the top is the crown, representing the kingdom of God; in the center is the cross of Christ; at the base is the three-part orb. The two top sections represent Judea and Samaria, and the bottom half represents all the world.

So, it is part of who we are as the United Church of Christ to spread the good news of God’s kingdom, of the resurrected Christ, to all corners of the world. And to a certain extent, we have reached the ends of the earth – in breadth, if not in depth. Christianity is a worldwide phenomenon.

I have a lot of respect for young Latter Day Saints missionaries who come and knock on doors and provide a witness to their faith. I may not agree with their perspectives, but I have deep respect for anyone whose depth of conviction enables them to go out into the world and risk rejection for telling others what they believe. I’m not suggesting that this approach is one we should take in the UCC, but it does give one pause to reflect on how reticent we are – not only about imposing our beliefs on others or saying that we have the only way to salvation – but even sharing our own experiences of faith and extending an invitation to others to share the gift we’ve found at Plymouth. I have a strong suspicion (which is reinforced by the fact that a couple hundred people have joined Plymouth in the last five years) that there are a lot of people in this community who are really eager to find a community of faith like this one – they just don’t know we exist.

At our first new members class last week, one of our prospective members gave me a new brochure from the UCC called “Are You Ready to Talk about Your Church?” Before you say, “NO!” let me read you some of the contents.

“Try this simple quiz! A new family moves onto your street and you’re having a conversation. ‘Thanks so much for all your help. It’s exhausting to move. There’s so much to do. I have to find a new dry cleaner, a new grocery store. Why, we’ll even have to find a new church.’” And here are the multiple choice answers: “A. Yeah, moving stinks. B. Yes, I know how hard that is. I’d be glad to steer you to a few places. And we attend a wonderful church that really helped us get settled when we moved here ourselves. I’d be glad to tell you about it. C. I can recommend an outstanding dry cleaner.”

Even though we are not knocking on doors or offering a surefire ticket to eternal life on the other side of the Pearly Gates, we at Plymouth need to be ready to tell our story...the story of who we are as the United Church of Christ...the story of who our congregation is and is becoming...the story of how our faith is shaped by the people with whom we share this pilgrimage. You heard this on Laity Sunday a few weeks back when Jake Joseph and John Karbula shared their stories. I heard it Wednesday night at our new members class, and I hope you have the opportunity to hear each others’ stories in all their richness and meaning. That’s a big part of the community – the gift – that is Plymouth.

I have a hunch. My suspicion is that part of the reason we are reticent about sharing our faith is because we don’t want to be seen as being in the same category as fundamentalist Christians.

As you probably know, Jerry Falwell died last week, which spurred a fair amount of reflection in the news. I don't know if you were listening to "All Things Considered" on NPR last Wednesday, but David Kuo, an evangelical Christian who formerly headed the Bush Administration's faith-based initiative offered a fairly critical commentary on Mr. Falwell's impact. Mr. Kuo said, "Jerry Falwell almost single-handedly blurred the line between Jesus and conservative politics" and without him "the Religious right wouldn't be what it is today, the most influential force in American politics." But that isn't what really horrified me; that was what I heard Mr. Kuo suggest: in his "truly horrifying statements about AIDS being God's condemnation of homosexuals, he may have turned more people away from Jesus than could fill all of today's megachurches." And he told of one of his friends who said, "Jerry Falwell is the reason I can't call myself a Christian."

I'm not telling you this to speak ill of the dead, but rather to point out a problem. *Our problem.* The problem we have with claiming our Christianity and being witnesses of the good news in the world today. Let's get local. I would suggest that Fort Collins has been saturated with the message proclaimed in fundamentalist Christian churches.

What people are beginning to realize is that there are a handful of churches that stand in contrast to the idea that "if-you-accept-Jesus-Christ-as-your-personal-Lord-and-Savior" you won't burn in hell; and that perhaps trying to *do what Jesus did* is more important than parroting an algebraic formula for salvation.

Perhaps what we offer is a tradition of intellectual integrity, or faith that incorporates both the heart and the mind, a tradition of engagement of faith in the world around us, a community of care and concern, openness to the movement of the Spirit and listening...because God is still speaking. We aren't perfect, nor do we claim to be. Jesus didn't say, "Go out and be perfect," he said "Go out and be my witnesses."



Being a witness isn't as hard or as intimidating as it sounds. For a lot of us in the UCC, the idea of "invitation" is a lot easier than "evangelism." When I invite someone to Plymouth it isn't because I think our way is the only way. It isn't because I think that we have a corner on the market when it comes to salvation. It's because I know there are good things going on here...life-giving ministries, provocative worship and education, mission and outreach that expand the lives of our members as well as those whom they serve. And I know that for a lot of people who have been turned off by the institutional church somewhere else, Plymouth can feel like an oasis...like home.

Why wouldn't we share that gift? Plymouth isn't the right church for everyone, but it just might be the home that someone you know has been seeking.

To the apostles gathered in Jerusalem 2,000 years ago, Fort Collins constitutes "the ends of the earth." So, let us in our own way, invite people into the fellowship we have come to know and love in this place. Amen.