

Sunday after Ascension (2025)

Anticipation builds excitement.

Thirty-eight years ago, around this time, a group of five or six were anticipating the first service of what would become St. Luke's, Blue Ridge.

Several planning meetings had been held in a café that was located at the time in the train station downtown.

The community room of what was then the City Hall had been secured for the inaugural service on Pentecost Sunday.

A small brass ensemble from Fannin County High School had been engaged to accompany the hymns.

Announcements had been placed on shop windows and in local newspapers.

There was excitement and anticipation . . . just as I suspect there was with the disciples in the time between Ascension Day and that first Christian Pentecost.

Jesus, according to St. Luke's Gospel, tells them just prior to being taken up: **“Tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high.”**

No doubt they were clueless what being “endued with power from on high” would look like, yet they were obedient.

In the same Gospel, we read: **“[They] returned to Jerusalem with great joy: and were continually in the temple, praising and blessing God.”**

I don't think we should pass over that word “joy”.

It is a sign that Jesus' preparation during the 40 days He had been with them following His resurrection had been successful. Otherwise, His physical departure would have spelt sorrow.

During this time, He opened their minds to understand the OT scriptures. One scripture He likely opened was Daniel 7. We read a portion of that passage at our service this past Thursday.

It records a vision Daniel was given in which He sees one like the son of man coming on the clouds of heaven to the Ancient of Days [to God]. This going up takes place after this divine / human figure had completed his appointed work down below. He is given a royal welcome and is enthroned as co-regent.

If indeed the disciples knew this scripture (and we have every reason to believe they did) when they saw Jesus going up on Ascension Day, they knew what it meant: **'mission accomplished'**.

On the cross, the forces of evil had been delt a mortal blow. Death itself had been defeated.

This, I want to suggest, was the source of the disciples' joy as they went back to Jerusalem to wait.

Their joy should be our joy. Our Lord reigns. Because of what He did, we don't have to fear the grave. We have been set free for life. With Jesus, life can be better. ///

Onto this morning's Gospel . . . The words recorded here are part of our Lord's Upper Room discourse given on the eve of His crucifixion.

In today's section, He tells the disciples what will happen after His physical presence is withdrawn. Specifically, He speaks of the coming of Someone like Himself. He calls this One the Comforter or Helper.

Three things in particular He says will happen when this Comforter is come.

First, He will instruct the Church. **“He shall testify of me,”** says Jesus.

We see this played out in history. It was the Holy Spirit who brought about the writing of the New Testament.

He did so by calling to mind all that Jesus said and did and caused chosen ones to write those things down, and to do so accurately. And others, like Paul in the Epistles, to tell what those things mean.

The same Spirit continues to illuminate the scriptures today. When they are read, the Holy Spirit makes Jesus alive and real to every generation.

More than that, the Spirit gives Jesus’ people holy boldness and sends them out.

I don't know if you have ever thought about it, but what a sad state we would be in if Jesus had left us with a manual of instruction, and nothing else. But He has not done so. He has given us a Divine Person to guide and go with us.

Pray that this Holy Spirit will have His way in your life and in the life of this Church . . . that He will enable you to think and do things beyond your own natural abilities and inclinations . . . that He will make all of us aware of our blind spots and give us the power to be the men and women God calls us to be.

So, the first thing that will happen when the Comforter is come is that He will instruct the Church. A second and what follows after is that the Church will testify to the world. **“Ye also shall bear witness,”** Jesus continues.

This is exactly what happened on the Day of Pentecost. The disciples did not stay in the

Upper Room and revel in their new gift of God's presence and their new knowledge.

No, they went out and announced Jesus, crucified, risen and reigning.

More than that, their witness was with power.

After Peter preached, 3000 souls believed and were baptized. Let me hasten so say: It was not Peter's gift of persuasion, his silver tongue, that brought this about: it was the Holy Spirit.

The same is true today. We don't convert anyone. That's the work of the Holy Spirit. Our job is to bear witnesses.

What are some places you can bear witness this week? In the grocery store . . . in the laundromat . . . at your work . . . where else?

The college I attended had a religious foundation. As you entered the grounds, you pass through brick gates. On the way in you read: **Enter to increase in wisdom.**

On the way out: **Depart to share to share your culture with all mankind.** The culture referenced here is first and foremost Gospel truth.

The message on these brick gates are appropriate thoughts as we arrive and leave service each Sunday.

I once read about an Episcopal church in Florida. I can't remember now the town. In any case, this church had fallen on hard times.

It its early years, it had been a vibrant place of proclamation and witness. People were out in the community inviting their friends and neighbors. They were busy with community projects.

But then after the building was completed and all the ecclesiastical nick knacks acquired, church members became complacent and comfortable.

As the years passed, a local industry where many in the community worked closed. People moved away. The church went into maintenance mode.

Then one day a filing cabinet in the church office was moved. Behind that cabinet a bulletin from those earlier years was discovered. On the front were the words: **The mission of this church is to be a light in this community.**

This statement of purpose had long been forgotten. It was put back on the front of bulletins, and people began to recapture the vision of their fore-bearers.

The Spirit came in. The doors of the church were flung open. People went out. The church came alive.

That is what is needed in every congregation across America. Dare to do your part.

This week I came across a quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer that points us in the right direction as we seek to carry out our mission:

“Your life as a Christian should make non-believers question their disbelief in God.”

Going back to this morning’s Gospel, in review, when the Comforter is come, He will instruct the Church and the Church will bear witness to Jesus in the world.

But that is not all. Jesus adds a third thing that will happen post-Pentecost: The Church will face opposition:

“They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service.”

Up to this time, Jesus Himself had borne the brunt of opposition, especially from the religious leaders of the day. But soon their fury will be transferred to the disciples. Jesus does not want them to be taken by surprise when this happens. So, he forewarns them.

His words are for us as well. When the Church is being true to her Lord, there will likely be opposition. This opposition will come not just from militant atheists and secularists, but from those who profess religion.

Ten or 15 years ago there was a story in the news of a high-ranking church official who was quoted saying she would rather sell closed church buildings to Muslims than to faithful

Anglican congregations. Indeed, this is what happened in one New York town.

Well, there you have it. Don't expect smooth sailing. Be prepared to fight the good fight even when it is not easy or popular. Don't be surprised at opposition.

Just keep your eye on the finish line and above all don't lose your sense of excitement and joy. Jesus' side is the winning side. As Jesus' first followers were in a spirit of expectation as they waited for God to do the next bit, so let it be with us.

As one writer has said and with these words I close: "Threats and opposition / Shall not blunt our mission. / Let all the world hear -- / God is in control!"