***First Followers: The Mystery of the Church Age***

This week in our Portraits series we come to the days between the Resurrection and the Ascension; something like six weeks. Next week Pastor Jimmy will speak on the remarkable event of Pentecost, which culminates the period we are looking at today.

Our approach through this series has been to try and penetrate to the experience of the ordinary people who were swept up in the events around the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth: Barnabas, the man born lame, the Ethiopian Eunuch, Mrs. Cornelius and Mrs. Tanner, and even the High Priest Annas.

Last Wednesday was Ascension Day, forty days after Easter each year, and this is the one time of year we talk specifically about this period between the resurrection and Jesus’ exaltation wherein he now all power in heaven and earth (Rev 3:21).

The word Ascension isn’t in the Bible, but it describes that moment when Jesus departed the world after his resurrection.

Luke says in Luke 24:51 that While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them (and was carried into heaven) [some ancient mss omit “and was carried into heaven] and in Acts 1:9 says as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

And Luke is extraordinarily spare in his description of the event. In his gospel Luke 24:51 the only explicit reference to it in all the gospels. Here Luke gives the impression it happened on the evening of Easter Day.

It is curious that neither Mark, Matthew nor John mentions the Ascension (except in the “longer ending” of Mark, not thought to be in the original version of the Gospel).[[1]](#endnote-1) I’m not quite sure what to make of that.

But then we learn more in Luke’s second volume, Acts, where a six-week period of time elapses between the resurrection and the ascension, but then again in a single verse in Acts 1.

Now what can you say about the Resurrection and the Ascension, really? They are a pair of supra-rational events that cannot be “explained.” As C.S. Lewis said, they are what they are, they are what they have always been, long before I was here, and whether I like it or not. It is not our role to convince people these events, because that isn’t possible with the supra-rational. We are only to bear witness to the events by the authenticity of our Christian lives.

My title this morning is Portraits in Acts: The Mystery of the Church Age. I call it a “mystery” because Jesus, in all of his teaching, never talks about a church to come. In fact, he only uses the word “church” once in an oblique reference to Peter - …on this rock I will build my church (Matt 16:18, otherwise only here and 18:17 in all of the gospels, in each case it is likely that the word “church” or eklēsia was a later emendation).

In the apocalyptic discourses Jesus speaks of the end of history, but as to what intervenes, only that And the gospel must first be preached to all the nations (Mark 13:10 and parallels, Matt 10:18 and Luke 21:13). These are amazingly oblique references to an epoch of history that has now dragged on for 2000 years, and may go another 2000 for all we know.

We live within the great, uncharted territory of the Church Age. It is such a strange thing God has asked us to do! Living here as we do in the time of Withdrawal.

Paul put it this way in quoting an early Christian hymn in 1 Tim 3:16:

Without any doubt, the mystery of our religion is great:

He was revealed in flesh,  
    vindicated in spirit,   
        seen by angels,  
proclaimed among Gentiles,  
    believed in throughout the world,  
        taken up in glory.

But one thing is clear, that following the resurrection that those appearances over forty days, the witnesses were left to face the world alone. As Luke says, he took them out to Bethany, blessed them …he withdrew from them…

This marks the great divide in history, the epoch in which we now live.

It is helpful to say something about the idea of the view of history in the biblical drama. I like to talk about this, at least once a year, because I believe our ability to live for Christ in this long, unforeseen present epoch demands an understanding of the concept of Christian history.

There are four epochs or stages in the story of the salvation (from Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke*, pg. 16)

* The period of the OT, or the period of Israel, which extends from Creation to Christ.
* The period of Jesus’ life, death, resurrection and ascension, what Conzelmann calls “the center of history”
* The period since the Ascension, the Age of the Church, the time of absence, the main characteristic of which is the presence of the Spirit within the church and “during which the virtue of patience is required”
* The Parousia, the return of Christ and the end of human history.

In our text for the week we find this remarkable claim: After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. (Acts 1:3)

As we peer into this sacred six weeks of Jesus’ presence among the apostles, we are peering into what is, for us, the *centre of history*. And it is amazing to observe that nobody knew what was coming. And, my friends, talk about blind corners! The death and resurrection of Jesus was a blind corner, and that there would be this extended age of the church is the longest blind corner in history.

And yet, here we are. We live in a mystery – the Age of the Church. You think this is difficult? Of course it is! This is a tough assignment! But more on this in a moment.

Let stay with the “forty days” for a bit here and see what we can learn.

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

Have you ever wondered why, after the resurrection, Jesus appeared only to his apostles and a few women (Acts 1:1-2, 12-14)? Maybe a couple of dozen people. And after the Ascension, a short time later, the core group numbered only 120 people in total (Acts 1:15).

Why not go public? Why was the Kingdom of God to remain hidden for an indefinite period of time after the Ascension?

This is really the first question out of the apostles’ mouths, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6)

I’m sorry, I’m really with the apostles on this one. I just don’t get it. Why, oh why, expose the church to, well, so far… 2000 years of human temptation to political power, lust, greed and ethical failings of every imaginable sort? All areas in which we have never failed to disappoint God.

You name it, in spite of the overwhelming good of Christianity on society, it was and is a perilous journey! This time of the Withdrawal. Why did he have to leave us here to navigate centuries of life, an indeterminate period with only his Spirit to guide us? We have no idea when this period will end.

The kingdom of God was to remain a secret really. When the poor apostles stand looking up in the sky after Jesus is taken up, they are completely lost. Now it is just us?

An angel appears and says only this:

They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” (Acts 1:11)

You failed to mention, Mr. Angel, that it would be so long in between the Ascension and his coming again.

Now that Pastor Jimmy has joined us we can begin to do some planning for the next period of life for the church. We are starting to have conversation in staff meetings and on the Board, and in due course, with the entire congregation. Post-covid, the roaring 2020s, the challenges of cultural relevancy and demographic decline that all churches face, how to attract and hold younger families and millennials. These are all huge challenges for the church. I’m been listening to the church ask these same questions for 50 years. It just never ends.

I think it is important to us psychologically as a church to understand where we are in history.

We don’t live in the Centre of History, that time during the physical presence of Jesus in the world. We live in the age of the church with all of its terrors, dangers, challenges and opportunities. You think it is difficult being the church in this age? Of course it is.

How should we then live? as Francis Schaeffer put the question.

So I have a few observations about how we proceed. How we shall then live.

First. Do you know what Jesus did during this period of six weeks to get us ready for this difficult period? He does what he did throughout his entire ministry. He teaches.

Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. (24:27)

“Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures.” (24:45) “…then their eyes were opened and they recognized him…” (24:31)

Othe Road to Emmaus the day of the resurrection Jesus, hidden from his fellow travellers’ eyes, Jesus gives an extended recitation of the Old Testament and rereads Moses and all the prophets to reveal how it refers to the Messiah and specifically his death.[[2]](#endnote-2)

We should keep teaching and learning. We should continue to study Jesus’ teachings. And reread the Bible and try to keep ourselves centred.

Second. We recognize that we live in a time of mystery for the church. The continued hiddenness of the Kingdom of God means that we are its representatives in a broken world. This means that Conzelmann was right, the Age of the Church is “one in which patience is required.” We must keep on in spite of the challenges. We can’t give up.

Third. What the ***most important*** thing for us to focus on in this current church age?

* It isn’t when it ends. It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority (Acts 1:7)[[3]](#endnote-3) It doesn’t matter when or how this age ends. The only thing that matters is how we conduct ourselves.
* Not signs and wonders. Even though the charismata persisted, at least for a time, these are not the main feature of the witness that we are to bear in the Age of the Church.
* It isn’t evangelism or being witnesses, or compassionate ministries or praise and worship, although all these things are important.

The most important thing for the church in this age is right-ness. I would use the old-fashioned word righteousness, but it has gone out of style. Not the self-righteousness that we are so famous for- not the ‘I’m better than you’ sort. Not righteous as in being “right” about things.

But right-ness as in holy, ethically moral, blameless conduct working through love and grace. Schaeffer’s book I referred to asserts that we must live: *“by the Christian ethic, acceptance of God’s revelation, and total affirmation of the Bible’s morals, values, and meaning.”* And I would add, having done the ongoing work of rereading the Bible carefully and responsibly. (from a review online).

We understand where we are in the penultimate time of history. Not at the Centre of History, not at the Parousia, but in the Age of the Church, where our experience of Jesus is defined by the presence of the Holy Spirit in our hearts and in our community.

And it is our commitment to righteousness and love that speaks most eloquently to a world in such dire need of rightness – and which will see us through to the end.

1. See the “longer ending of Mark” in 16:19, thought to be a later emendation to the original manuscripts of Mark. Also indirect references to the Ascension Jn 6:62, 20:17 although no direct account of the Ascension. See also indirect references in Eph 4:8-10 quoting Ps 68:8; Heb 4:14, 7:26; 1 Pet 3:22; and the early Christian hymn of 1 Tim 3:16: He was revealed in the flesh, vindicated in spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among Gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. In Jesus’ last words before his ascension he refers to Hosea 6:1-3. …and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” (Luke 24:46-48) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Sometimes we feel baffled about what to do. Just look at how the disciples reacted to all of this during the 40 days. Here are some verbs of feeling and knowing I broke out for us…:

   * When the women found the stone rolled away they were “**perplexed** about this…” (24:4)
   * “**terrified**” when they saw two men in dazzling clothes beside them (24:5)
   * “Oh how foolish you are and **slow of heart to believe**…” the Risen Jesus says (24:25)
   * When Jesus appeared to the disciples they were “**startled and terrified**, and thought they were seeing a ghost.” (24:37)
   * **What are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts**? (24:38)
   * “While in their joy they were **disbelieving and still wondering**…” (24:41)

   [↑](#endnote-ref-3)