

## Sermons from Park Hill: May 4, 2008

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**Sermons from  
Park Hill Congregational UCC  
Denver, Colorado**

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**May 4, 2008**

**Acts 1:1-11  
“Are You a Witness?”**

One of my all-time favorite movies is Ferris Buehler’s Day Off. I think it’s hilarious. But one of the funniest lines happens after most of the crowd has already left the theatre. As the credits role there are still some scenes – kind of what happens next in the lives of the people in the movie. After all the credits have finished, and even the lion has roared, Ferris appears on the screen. “What are you still doing here? Go home!”

After Jesus has ascended into heaven, the crowd is still standing around, maybe looking up into the sky, or at each other. “Now what?” Two men in white robes appear and say, “What you still doing here? Except here, the expectation is not to go home but to get to work. When Jesus was preparing to leave – before the final boarding call – he gave them a few final words of instruction and concluded: “And you will be my witnesses.”

That’s actually kind of a scary thought. What if all someone knew about a Christian was by your actions – your deeds and words and attitudes. Not because you go around preaching it, but how you are in every day life. Would your neighbor know? Would they have any idea? Would your barber know, the dry cleaner, the cashier who is just taking her time while you’re in a rush? I just went to the dentist on Friday. After all the pain of being in the dentist’s chair, would they know, by my words and actions and attitudes, would they have any idea that I’m a Christian? Judging by my life, would they have any interest in it?

Because we *are* witnesses to our faith. Each of us. I’m a witness, you’re a witness, everywhere a witness-witness. Old McDonald had... Yup. He’s a witness too.

One day Betty was driving down the street and as she looked through her rear view mirror she saw a car coming – swerving around other cars, honking for others to get out of the way. Just generally acting obnoxious. When the car raced past Betty, almost sideswiping her and taking off her mirror, she called the police. They came and started chasing the wild driver; it looked like Grand Theft Auto to them. Sirens blaring, they finally caught up and came racing up to the car with their guns drawn. They dragged the driver out, slammed him against the car and cuffed him. “You’re under arrest for auto theft.” Completely confused the driver asked why they thought he had stolen the car. They replied it was clearly not his car because the bumper sticker read “Follow me to Sunday School.” He was the teacher and was late getting to church to give his lesson on patience. What a witness.

Jesus said, “You will all be my witnesses – to the ends of the earth.” I am a witness, and you are a witness. Repeat after me: “I am a witness.” Not just the saints, but... “I am a witness.” Not just

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the clergy or the deacons, but... "I am a witness." Not just the choir or the ushers, but... "I am a witness." You are all my witnesses.

Thank goodness it doesn't just depend on us as individuals. Christianity is a reflection of community. Even as the people who watched Jesus ascend stood there as individuals, they were addressed as a community. And when the two robed men asked why they were all standing around, looking into the sky, the men didn't say, "What are you doing Peter? Mary, what's up?" It was "*People of Galilee. Why are you standing around?*"

Protestants generally don't spend much time telling the story of Jesus' Ascension. For one thing, it happens on a Thursday. For most of us, if it doesn't happen on a Sunday morning, we don't hear about it. That's why we read the whole Holy Week story on Palm Sunday. Most people don't make it to services during the week.

But the other thing about the Ascension, the reason it's mostly ignored, is that it's another one of those things that make us kind of queasy. I really have to believe that?! That Jesus sat on a cloud and went up like a balloon? But, instead of ignoring it, let's consider what it means. I don't have to believe something happened literally to appreciate what the story is trying to teach.

There are some things I don't understand that I ultimately accept as faith – faith in something I can't fully appreciate or understand. You heard me reference miracles last week in my dialogue with Rabbi Morris. I don't go around proclaiming I *believe* in miracles, but I don't disbelieve in them. I don't *disbelieve* in miracles. Because I don't want to claim I understand everything about God. I don't want to reduce God to something I can rationalize. God remains

for me full of mystery and awe; I can't explain it. And God is capable of far more than I can imagine. And I believe God works in amazing ways through ordinary people as well as extraordinary, people like Jesus who were totally attuned to God, who makes God manifest in the world, in ways most of us can't even dream. God is awesome; I am filled with awe in the presence of God. I take this in faith.

The ascension? For me, this isn't one of those articles of faith. It, to me, is the literary device Luke chose to differentiate between the end of Jesus' life, in the Gospel of Luke, and the beginning of the church, in the Book of Acts. If you didn't already know, the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts, or the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, were written by the same person. Because the Gospel of John was placed in-between the two, we might overlook that. Acts might have been more accurately named Second Luke. What makes the fact that I think the ascension is a literary device – remember Joseph's dreams were the literary device that got the family to move from Bethlehem to Egypt and then to Nazareth instead of back to Bethlehem, all attributed to Joseph's dreams... What makes the ascension appear to be the same kind of thing is that Luke ends the gospel with Jesus' ascension and begins Acts with the ascension, but the details aren't all the same.

Luke is shifting at this point from calling them the 12 "disciples" and now in Acts they are the "apostles." A disciple is one who is being taught. An apostle is one who now goes and does it. The story of Jesus; now the story of the Church. Something had to happen to make that shift. And in some way, the disciples, now apostles, had to understand that it was now up to them to keep the teachings of Jesus alive. "You are my witnesses. Don't stand around waiting for me to do it for you." Clearly, Jesus is gone, ascended.

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And obviously it worked. 2,000 years later, here we are. It's a lesson, however, that has to be repeated. Many people think the clergy – who are ordained to be Christ's representatives in the world – are the ones who act out in the world on our behalf. In some people's minds, pastors are paid to do the mission of the church for them, or we elect a board to do it for us. I don't know that *you* feel that, but it is a common misperception. But, Jesus said, "You are all my witnesses." Yet, not just as individuals, but as a community of believers (and seekers and skeptics and whoever we are and wherever we are on life's journey).

Moving from being disciples who are taught to apostles who put those teachings into action – that's the message of the Ascension. Jesus isn't here to do it for us anymore. And we have to figure out how to be the church in the world. Which is a big reason why I want to have a Sunday where Jesus has left the building and we follow – when we don't have a worship service but engage in worshipful service.

If you haven't heard about it yet, on June 22<sup>nd</sup> we're going to have an out-of-the-building experience. It's time to put all the messages we have heard on Sunday mornings into practice – and be witnesses of the very things that Jesus taught to all of us. We're going to arrange for a variety of ways to express God's love, each of us choosing one way to be in worshipful service. Like we say about Martin Luther King Day, it's not a day off, it's a day on, to do the things we affirm we believe in. The biggest risk of the day, or at least one of the big risks, is that once again we'll say that is someone else's job to do. Imagine, however, what a witness to have about 80 children, youth, and adults, not behind doors but having opened the doors to the world and its needs, which is what I believe the Christian message is all about: Responding to the Good News.

After his resurrection Jesus had a conversation with Peter about whether Peter loved him. "Well, of course I do." Then, Jesus said, feed my sheep. Love my people. Tend to their needs. When Jesus began his ministry he proclaimed his mission to preach good news to the poor, set free those who are oppressed, liberate those captive to their surroundings. So among the worshipful service options we hope to offer include serving food to men and women who are homeless, offering a worship service for those who aren't able to get out of their nursing home, proclaiming God's love to those who don't believe God could possibly love them at the Pride Parade, picking up garbage in North Park Hill to honor the environment and encourage others to do so. But we need a few more ideas, and people willing to head the teams that will go to all these places. We need ways that people with limited mobility can be just as active. And a couple of people who will stay here to greet visitors who will be very intrigued by a church that acts in this kind of way. It's clear that as the pastor I can't be in all these places, nor can the Board of Social Justice and Outreach. We are *all* witnesses. We want to witness to our children, who should be involved in the projects too. What a witness to them of our beliefs. Where can you worship God by serving God's people? Remember, one person makes a big difference; a whole community doing this together makes an enormous difference and witnesses to the fact that we try to be a different kind of church. Not a day off from church but a day on for all of us.

Perhaps the Ascension isn't an absolute article of faith, but, for me, a non-negotiable article of faith is exactly what the Ascension teaches: Don't stand around looking up, for somebody else to do it, but you are all my witnesses. Consider what our actions, words, deeds, and attitudes say to those around us. (Our attitudes say a whole lot more about us than anything we

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say.) Does practicing a Christian faith mean anything different than how we would act as simply a good person? At my last church I tried to help us think about that. What makes us different from the Kiwanis Club, for instance? What's the difference between a church and a social service agency, all of whom do very similar or even the same things? To me the difference is that I do this to honor, or worship, God. To me the difference is that I do this to follow the teaching and example of Jesus Christ. To me, I'm empowered to do what I didn't think I could on my own by the Spirit. And to me, I don't do this on my own but as part of my church family. It is a witness of my faith together with your faith – as challenging and exasperating as that may be at times when you deal with other people.

Are you a witness? Then feed my sheep; love my people; turn over the tables of oppression; share your possessions, or rather, give back to God what is God's in the first place before it rots and grows moldy. Are you a witness? Will people know you are a Christian by your acts of love? Will people know this is a church that cares about them in more than just theory?

Today is the end of instruction. Next week is Pentecost, which begins a new six month season of the church. From Advent to Christmas to Epiphany to Lent to Easter to the Ascension, we have learned about the teachings of Christ. On the day of Pentecost we receive the encouragement and power of the Spirit to practice those teachings, which were, in fact, so powerful that the first Christians sold all their possessions and created a common fund for people according to their need. That was quite a witness! Are you a witness? Can I join you in that?