

Southwestern Texas Synod Assembly
Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson
Corpus Christi, Texas
May 19, 2012

Grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus, amen.

It is a great joy to be with you this weekend. You will see me in a variety of contexts. How privileged I am to begin my presence with you by proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ with you.

So you look a little tired. I suspect it's from all the heavy partying on Thursday. I'm not talking about *Syttende Mai* and Norwegian Independence Day. I'm talking about how exhausted you must be from celebrating the Day of the Ascension. How many of you were absolutely packed out in your congregations, the choir was fully robed, the band was playing, the organist was on top, the pastor has never preached such a great Ascension Day sermon and people were literally slain in the aisles? How many of you had that happen in your congregations? What's happened to Ascension Day?

How many of you at least got up that morning and said, "Lord, it's the Day of the Ascension."? And you sent or received at least one Ascension Day card. Well, I was delighted to see that Walgreen's is now offering musical Ascension Day cards. I sent two. One is you open it and it's, "Will he ever return? No, he'll never return and his fate is still unlearned." And the other one was, "Up, up and away."

So what gives with Ascension Day being totally ignored? Is it because the culture hasn't come up with some way to commercialize it and make a profit? There's no Santa and elves and gift-giving. There are no bunnies, baskets or Easter egg hunts. This could be it in part. However, I think it's deeper than that. I think we don't know what to do with the Ascension because it doesn't fit in with our world view. Just where did Jesus go anyway?

I mean it worked 2,000 years ago to say as we heard in both the Luke and the Acts texts that he ascended into heaven because in Jesus' day, it was a three-tiered universe. The flat earth contained humanity and all of God's creatures. The heavens were the place of God and the angels. Deep below the earth was a place of darkness and doom where the devil lurked and the dead went. So it all fit. But we live in the age of astrophysics, distant galaxies, space shuttles, dark holes. So just where did Jesus go anyway. Could you turn to your neighbor and just finally answer that question.

Well, we say in the Creeds that he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God. And he will come again to judge the living and the dead. Jesus is in the presence and is the presence of God. I want to suggest to you this morning that the most important question for us on the Day of the Ascension, and as we reflect on it two days later, is not, "Where did Jesus go?" but "What did he leave for his soon-to-be apostles and for us?" In the reading from Luke's gospel, we hear that he left for us a perspective, a way of seeing the world, a way of understanding the Scriptures. And we call that perspective, those eyes, the eyes of faith.

In Luther's commentary on his introduction to the Book of Romans, Luther said, "Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that you would

stake your life on it a thousand times.”¹ Jesus opened their minds to understand the Scriptures. Not a small accomplishment. Let’s admit it. The Scriptures are not easy to understand, are they?

We have our favorite Bible stories. We have verses that bring consolation in times of sorrow and death, and hope in times of despair. But taken as a whole, the Scriptures are not easy. In fact, witness what we have done to and with the Scriptures of late. We have taken the Scriptures and made them become a wedge dividing us, rather than God’s means of opening us up to living faith in Jesus the Christ. Jesus opened their minds to the Scriptures and what did he do? He said the Scriptures and the law of Moses and the prophets show forth Jesus, his death, his resurrection, his aching loss of Good Friday, his forsaken absence of Holy Saturday, and the astonishing newness of his resurrection on Easter morning.

One thing we Lutherans have received from Luther (and maybe Luther got it from Jesus in Luke 24) is that the Scriptures, first and foremost, show forth Jesus. If we could agree on that, then we can have heartfelt and thoughtful disagreements about how to interpret Scripture and make application of Scripture to the complex issues we face in our life today. Jesus opened their eyes and minds, giving us a perspective on the Scriptures, which is seeing the Scriptures and hearing the Scriptures through the eyes and ears of faith of which Jesus is both its subject and its object. Jesus leaves us with a perspective on how God chooses to be God.

About two months ago now, I was invited to participate in the Coexist Foundation annual awards event. It’s a global foundation that seeks to encourage understanding among people of different religions. This was the first year they were going to give a \$100,000 prize to the local person or group who had made significant contributions to lessening tension and increasing understanding among religions. The prize went to a young woman from Indonesia who, after college, had returned to her village. And it was a village where the Christian and Muslim men had come to a place of such violence that they were hurting and killing each other. This young woman began to organize the women and children in the village as a counterforce, a force for non-violence and peace, a force for understanding. And do you know what? God, working through her and that movement of women and children, caused the men to lay down their arms, to begin to engage each other in conversation and to move to some sort of reconciliation. And then she moved on to the next village and the next. Can you imagine what she is going to do with that \$100,000 prize?

The program that night was the Grand Mufti of Egypt, the chief Islamic leader of Egypt; Rabbi David Saperstein, whom I think is probably the most articulate Reformed Rabbi in the country; and myself. We were to engage in inter-religious dialogue. The interviewer was a religious broadcaster from Great Britain. The last question he asked us that night was this, “You each have two minutes to share the core of your faith, that which you would hold on to and share with others but never give away.”

Rabbi Saperstein began, “As a Jew we believe that there are many pathways to God, which leaves us open to people of other religions.”

I was next. Think about this. If you had two minutes to give the core of the Christian faith, what would you say? Without warning I said, “Well, unlike my brother David

¹ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works Volume 35, Word and Sacrament I*, E. Theodore Bachman and Helmut T. Lehmann eds. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960) 370-371.

Saperstein, we Christians don't begin with us and our many pathways to God. We begin with God, who is always creating many pathways to us in order to show the depth of God's love and the breadth of God's mercy for all that God has created. We believe God is always improvising in order to reveal the depth of God's love, even choosing a couple of old fogies like Abraham and Sarah, way beyond child-bearing years. (Sorry if I offended you AARP members.) He chose Abraham and Sarah and said, 'Through you, I will bless all the generations.' God stopped Moses, a murderer, in his tracks, 'Wait a minute. Go to Pharaoh and demand that Pharaoh let my people go.' And as God's people began to experience the infancy of their liberation and then began to become rebellious and long for the security of bondage, God improvised again. He called Moses up on to the mountain and said, 'Here are ten words on a tablet. Give them to my people and if they follow them, then they will worship only me and they will live responsibly and respectfully with each other.' Yet the people kept rebelling and sinning and God said, 'What do I do now?' And God said, 'If you can't overpower them, then bend down humbly and meet them in who they are and where they are.' God became one of us in Jesus the Christ. Jesus began to walk the earth, showing the expanse of God's love and mercy by sitting at tables with sinners, by touching and healing the untouchables, by casting out demons, by gathering the greatest riff-raff of disciples you could ever imagine. We nailed Jesus to a cross for that. God said, 'How do I keep improvising now?' And God had one more move. God raised Jesus from the dead. We believe God meets us in Jesus in words and baptismal waters and says, 'You are my child. I will love you steadfastly for Jesus' sake. I'll forgive you mercifully and on the last day I will raise you up to new life. But I'm not going to send you into the world on your own. I'm going to gather you into this living body of the Christ called the church. I'm going to infuse you with the power of the Holy Spirit. I'm going to send you with the mark of the cross of Christ on your forehead and the promise of his resurrection on the lips. And now I'm going to be present for and through you.' I think I did it in two minutes.

This is the perspective of faith that Jesus leaves with his apostles and us. It's the perspective, Jesus said, of repentance and forgiveness. That means our orientation to life is not looking back, being bound in the chains of guilt, for you are forgiven in the name of Christ, which means you have been turned away from preoccupation with your failures of the past. You have been turned towards God's love, God's promised future, which is God's gift to us.

In the little town in South Dakota where my dad was raised, the railroad came to an end. And so when the train pulled in, the whistle sounded, the men left what they were doing and went down to the railroad yard. Each took a pole and put it in this round lazy-Susan like platform where the locomotive was, and together they would turn that locomotive to get it in the right direction. That's what Jesus is saying repentance is. Your life and mine have come to a dead end if we think we can save ourselves. But the Holy Spirit turns us as a whole community of faith away from preoccupation with the past towards the world and towards God's promised future.

So Jesus leaves us not only with a perspective, a way of seeing and hearing, but also a purpose. You shall be my witnesses from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. Guess what? This is May 19th, 2012 and we are in Corpus Christi, Texas. This, compared to where Jesus was when he said that, is the end of the earth. And do you know what? We've gathered here to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. We've gathered here to sing

God's praises. Do you know what that means? That for 2,000 years, God's purpose in calling us to be witnesses has been fulfilled. One generation to the next, one grandparent to grandchild, one pastor to a congregation, one choir to the assembly, one neighbor to neighbor, telling the good news of Jesus Christ. And the purpose is still given to us.

I get a little annoyed with how much I hear people talking today, "That's God's plan for your life and mine." I don't think God has a little computer chip tucked away in some frame of a computer that your task, should you choose to accept it, is to try to discern God's plan. God grants us enormous freedom, but within that freedom gives us a purpose to be witness to these things, these improvisational moves of God in Christ for the sake of God's love and mercy for the whole creation.

How many of you have been a witness in a courtroom? When you were called to be a witness, you were asked to speak the truth about what you saw and heard because literally, someone's guilt and innocence, someone's life or death could hang in the balance. Jesus says, "Go and be my witnesses. Don't go and be the prosecuting attorney or the judge or jury or defense attorney. Go and testify to what you see and hear of what God is up to in Jesus Christ in your life and in the world."

So even as Bishop Ray is getting nervous that I'm going to go too long, I want this assembly to do a little witnessing. Where is one place you have seen God show up in the last couple weeks in your life, in the world, in and through the life of your congregation, in this synod? Turn to someone next to you and begin that witnessing now. (Sharing)

So you see it's not true. When you mix a Jehovah's Witness and a Lutheran, you get someone who rings a lot of doorbells and prays mightily that no one is home. So sisters and brothers, I literally stop almost every sermon now and ask people to do this because the purpose is still given to us by Jesus, to go and bear witness. But if we don't practice with each other, are we going to really have the courage and confidence to witness to others?

But there's a final gift that Jesus leaves with his apostles and us. It's not just a perspective and faith and the purpose of being witnesses. Jesus leaves us with the power of the Holy Spirit. We're not sent on our own. We're not sent to draw upon our wisdom or even our faith. The Holy Spirit will give you the words to say. The Holy Spirit will work through our feeble attempts. The Holy Spirit will give you courage to work for justice and confront evil. The Holy Spirit will give you compassion to someone who's at the end stages of life in hospice care. The Holy Spirit will give you the freedom to rejoice over new life. The Holy Spirit is at work in your life and through the life and ministry of your congregation, no matter how large or small you are.

Back to that question, "Where did Jesus go?" Harvey Cox says, "The ascension in its simplest terms means Jesus is mobile."² Christ is alive in the world. At the end of the book of Mark, the angel says, "He has gone ahead of you to Gaililee. There he will meet you as he promised." Christ has gone ahead of you into the world. Jesus will meet you in the most unexpected places because now when Jesus has gone to the grave, there are no God-forsaken places left. And Jesus will meet you in the most surprising places and faces. The one who lives in fear of deportation. The one who agonizes in poverty. The one who wonders if they are welcomed here in the fullness of their humanity. Christ is meeting you there and you are sent to be Christ to that neighbor. But not on your own. So

² Harvey Cox, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective* (New York: Collier Books, 1990), 50.

will you put your hand on someone's head as I now pray for the anointing of the power of their Holy Spirit upon you and upon this assembly.

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Father in Heaven, for Jesus's sake, stir up in these women and men and children, the power of your Holy Spirit. Confirm their faith. Guide their lives. Empower them in the servicing and witnessing. Give them patience in suffering and bring them to everlasting life. In the strong name of Jesus, we pray.

Amen.