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You Want Us To Do What?!? 4. Put On Your Robe

Acts 1:1-11 1In 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. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. 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."

Our scripture today in this final in our post-Easter sermon series concerning Jesus' post-resurrection appearances to the disciples and the things He told them on those occasions traditionally goes by the name of the Ascension. Our bulletin cover this morning is one of the many thousands of works of art that have sought to depict this story, for while it is has never been a key part of our Disciples tradition, in many parts of the church today – including, by the way, our friends at Grace Episcopal – the Ascension story is a major celebration. In fact, in the early centuries of the Church's life, Ascension Day was a far, far bigger celebration than Christmas, rivaling Easter, in fact, for the attention paid to it. So while the story may seem quaint or odd to our

modern world-view, we should not rush by it too quickly. So let's indeed linger on it this morning for a few minutes and see what it might have to teach us.

I once had the challenge of doing a Children's Sermon on this scripture. For awhile I thought about using a Star Trek analogy and saying this was like when Captain Kirk (you can tell that that dates me, doesn't it!) says "*Beam me up, Scotty!*" But that really didn't seem to have too much theological depth so I did what preachers have often done which is to ask the children a question. One does that with some trepidation, though, because I recall a colleague who when doing a Children's sermon on the Ten Commandments and the importance of rules asked the children if they had rules in their house; whereupon one of the four-year-olds grabbed the microphone and loudly shouted "*In our house the rule is that you don't pee on the floor.*" Nonetheless, I asked the children: "*What does this story make you think of?*" And one youngster answered: "*Well, just like I was promoted from kindergarten to first grade, and got to go upstairs to my new classroom, this was sort of like **Jesus'** promotion day and he got to go upstairs too.*"

I remembered that answer as I was thinking about today's sermon, on a day when we too have promoted some of our children to new Sunday School classes and have recognized our high school and college graduates who have had their own sort of "promotion." But I actually think that that long-ago youngster in that Children's Moment got it backwards: for this was not so much **Jesus'** "promotion" day, but rather the disciples' "promotion" day – and **ours**. What do I mean by that? Well, think about it for a moment: Do you remember what it was like to be promoted from, say, elementary to middle school? I do. And even though in those pre-historic days we went from 6th

grade to Junior High instead of 5th grade to middle school, the experience is probably still similar today. I don't know about you, but I can recall, in those more innocent days before schools had police and metal detectors, that during those first new weeks of Junior High my friends and I would often continue to stop back by our elementary school, wandering the halls, greeting our now-former teachers. We were drawn back to the familiar, the comfortable, the place where we knew the rules and expectations. But over the course of the next two or three months, those return visits slackened off and then finally stopped as we fully engaged in, fully came to be at home in, fully were intrigued and challenged by our **new** school with its new opportunities, its new things to learn, its new responsibilities.

That, of course, is why the disciples stood there, slack-jawed, eyes wide, looking anxiously up into the sky. Because they feared that with Jesus' apparent "promotion," He too would soon be gone forever, leaving them to fend for themselves with only their memories of that three years they'd spent together. But, you see, they misunderstood. Because, as I say, the Ascension story is not so much the story of Jesus' "promotion" as it is the story of THEIR promotion. As one preacher puts it:

They are not to be stuck.... Rather they... are to discover the gift of new life, new hope, and new beginnings in themselves. Indeed, they are to discover the power... that will move them in their own lives from the things that hold them down, the things that grind them down, to a new and renewed life, [to] a grand and hopeful life in God.¹

¹James Lemler, http://day1.org/1092-you_cant_keep_a_good_man_down

But we're getting ahead of ourselves; let's back up a bit and you'll begin to see why this is indeed a "promotion" for the **disciples** and why indeed it is **our** "promotion" too.

Did you notice the line in the story that says "*While [Jesus] was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them*"? Two men. Two men in robes, white robes. Now, wherever in the Bible you see a reference to "two men" there is something important about to happen: it was "two men" who visited Sarah and Abraham to announce that Sarah would have a son, it was "two men" who walked on that sad and dusty road to Emmaus where Jesus joined them and caused them to know that He indeed was alive; it was "two men" who were crucified with Jesus and Jesus' very last act of His earthly ministry was to forgive and bless. But, there's something even more important about the number two in the Jewish tradition in which the gospel writers are steeped: the number two is *incomplete* and is waiting, as it were, on the number three. For you see, in the Biblical tradition the number three is always symbolic of **completeness**; of sufficiency, of enough to do the job.² Now hold that thought, for there's yet one more symbol in today's story that we need to look at before we fully grasp the "promotion" that was given those disciples and which is now our "promotion" too. For what were those two men wearing? *Robes*. White robes. In both the Bible and in the middle east of the gospel writers, everybody wore a robe. But they weren't white. In a dusty desert land where everybody walked and there was no Clorox, **white** robes were something extraordinary and special. They indicated that the wearer had a high calling; they were for royalty and others who had been set apart for

²Cf. <http://www.turnbacktgod.com/biblical-numbers-1-10/>

some special service and mission. In the first centuries of the church's life, when new converts were baptized, they were baptized naked and when they came up out of the waters of new life the first thing that happened was that a *white robe* was put on them, indicating their new calling, their new mission as new disciples of Christ. The Book of Revelation is full of references to the Church as those who have been given white robes to wear in the face of a hostile culture.

Do you begin to see it? Two men confront the disciples. Two men in robes. Two men whose very "two-ness" means that we are supposed to realize that there is something missing, two men whose robes mean that there is something very special to be done. *So what will complete this picture?* The disciples, of course. And what will they need to **do**? They need to put on their robes, to put on their *new* robes, the robes that bespeak the sacred mission, the sacred "promotion" that they have received from Jesus. Because He gave them one, didn't He: "*You will be my witnesses,*" He told them, "*in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*" And so they did. That was their "promotion." They indeed went on to Jerusalem and on the day of Pentecost they began their witnessing. And what did they witness to? They witnessed

- To a God who was love unconditional and a Savior who came not that the world would be condemned but that everyone would know abundant life.
- To a savior whose love for children was so audaciously adamant that in His name they would start orphanages for unwanted children and work against the horrific Roman practice of killing female babies.
- To a Lord who told Peter to put away his sword and so under His sway

they began that long arc of justice-making that said that everyone deserved to be equal under the law and that violence must never be a first or easy resort.

And my friends, on this morning, we too are offered the opportunity to put **our** robes on, to also be Jesus' witnesses in *our* time and place, and in our own way and in our own context to continue the work and ministry of those disciples. For we too have been "promoted," we too are indeed sent. For

- Just as the disciples were sent to witness to a God of love who doesn't hate anyone, so too are we sent to tell those who have been hurt and abraded and abused by those who would tell them that they are second-rate and second-class that they are welcome in the family and household of the Lord, where class or race or gender or ethnicity or sexuality matters not one whit to us or to the Lord of love.
- Just as the disciples were sent to witness to the fact that in Jesus' eyes every child is a precious gift and that girl babies are just as beloved as boy babies, so too are we sent on this Mother's Day into a culture that still too often in a thousand different ways demeans and objectifies girls and women, treating them and encouraging them to treat themselves as sex objects, implying that whatever odious things happen to them is their fault. We are sent to witness to Jesus Christ's resounding "No" to such things.
- Just as the disciples were sent into their time and place to witness to a Lord of Love who wept and was angered when His children were fed to

the lions for witnessing to the power and need for peace, so to are we sent into our time and place to witness to the fact that in the name of all that is Holy we must and will find a way to come together, joining hands across the slogan-slinging and the demonizing , to find ways to make it ever so much less likely that any mother and father will ever have to stand over the body of a child riddled with bullets because we preferred conspiracy theories to common-sense compromise.

My friends, it is indeed “promotion” day for you and for me. For we have been sent. Jesus Himself is sending us. Can you see them? – God’s own angels are standing before us, holding up those robes for us to put on so that we can join in the wondrous witness that God has for us, the joyful job that Jesus says is now ours to do. So: put your robe on, put your robe on.