June 1, 2014
THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD

What happened? That’s exactly what stunned disciples asked themselves as the risen Lord ascended into heaven. As they craned their necks upward, the last thing they saw were the soles of our risen Lord’s feet getting smaller and smaller against a still Judean sky. What happened? The story is fairly straightforward. Some 40 days after his resurrection and numerous appearances to his followers, the risen Lord left these men and women for good, with only a mission and a promise.

The mission was to take the good news of God’s unconditional acceptance to the entire world. The promise included both his presence with them and his assurance that he would return some time in the future. In the meantime, there was work to be done ….taking the message to the whole world starting in Jerusalem, and then all Judea, Samaria, and beyond. What happened? The disciples heard the assignment, watched Jesus
vanish before their sight, but they kept looking into the heavens thinking perhaps that if they looked long enough, he would come back. They looked so long, the angel had to bring them back to earth, ordering them to return to the city.

The record is clear: he didn’t come back. He took off for heaven and left them with a simple flow chart for world mission. According to Acts, the disciples returned to Jerusalem and locked themselves up in an upper room fearing arrest from the authorities. They stayed there for days.

Because of Judas’ death, they needed a 12th disciple. So they cast lots and chose Mathias. That’s about all they did except pray. Believe me, they prayed and prayed, and prayed some more, still asking themselves, “What happened?”

Doesn’t life get that way for all of us from time to time? Wonderful things happen in our lives that really change life’s content and texture. Someone gets married… a baby shows up…
we move… buy a house… get a diagnosis… bury a parent… lose a job… find a job or discover a new friend. **Life happens** all around us. But what do these things mean? What is it about humankind that find us always searching for the meaning behind what happens to us and in us and around us?

**For one thing, we have memories.** Imagine the memories the disciples kept in their souls of being with Jesus Christ. They remembered that day when he called them by the seashore. The feeding of the 5,000, the healing of the lame, the restoring of sight to the blind, his walking on the sea and sharing meals with them night after night for three years … these events populated their memories. Their ears could still hear his charismatic voice, their eyes remembered his piercing gaze, their hands still felt his warm touch, and their minds treasured his keen intellect. The same is true for us. When the unexpected happens – (even when we are expecting it!) -- memory raises its hand demanding our attention.
This hunger for meaning (though rooted in memory!) is focused on behavior. Because something happened the way it happened, how do I act now? For decades, you have cherished the gift of your parents. But now, perhaps both parents have died and you have no one your senior on whose shoulder you can lay a troubled head. Or your business just seemed to grow and grow until new technology claimed a customer who no longer needed what you do or the way you do it. How do you re-frame your business or re-define the meaning of work? Or as retirement nears, you can’t help but wonder how you will fill your senior years with tasks rich in meaning that will make those years memorable. How to respond to changes in life? Our scriptures today may have some pointers for us.

The disciples had just spent three years of their lives following Jesus. They went where he went, ate what he ate, slept where he slept. They listened to his teaching and spent time with the same people who gathered around their Master. Few decisions
showed up on their doors. After all, they were following **him**. He seemed to know exactly what to say and how to say it, what to do and how to do it. They simply followed. Suddenly, all that changed. Now, they would be making the decisions hopefully informed by their beloved Master’s values and risen life. “What happened?” becomes “What **can** happen?” or “What **must** happen?”

Where does this leave us (or perhaps lead us?) on this day as we remember the ascension? Let me suggest *it leaves us leaning our lives on who Jesus **is**, and what Jesus **taught**, and how Jesus **calls us to live.** Like the disciples on that mountaintop outside Jerusalem, our only source of energy, direction, and strength lies in remembering our Lord’s life, lessons, values, and dreams for us. This remembering aspect of our faith throws light on the importance of reading the Bible, hearing the scriptures in liturgy, and asking ourselves how we apply what we hear and learn to our
lives. Our lives will be all God wants them to be…to the degree we base our lives on Jesus teaching.

Following Jesus is not always an easy calling. It is, however, a constant calling. As Christians, we are called to follow Jesus Christ with a constancy and faithfulness ….regardless of the changing circumstances around us. At every turn, listen to his voice, embrace his values, and let his love flow through you. Such awareness brings us the power to face whatever happens with courage born of living faith.

Where does this lead us as followers of the risen Christ? **Matthew raises his hand wanting us to hear again our Lord’s great commission to take the good news to every person on planet earth.** Since his elevation to the papacy, Pope Francis has said on numerous occasions, both from the Vatican and in his travels, that the Church must re-claim the evangelistic calling
given us by Christ. Our faith is a missionary faith that has changed and will continue to change the world if we share it.

When we find ourselves asking “What happened?” we do well to re-focus on “what could happen” if we would allow our lives to be led by the One who died and rose again. Our days will be filled with meaning when we season our conversation with grace, incorporate mercy into our attitudes, and focus on others more than we focus on ourselves. What happened? Sometimes we never know. But when memory joins hands with meaning, all kinds of good things can happen. Just keep reading through The Acts of the Apostles and see how these head-scratching disciples went on to change the world!