

May 24, 2009

The witness and ambassador of truth

Acts 1:1-11, Luke 24:50-53

A few weeks ago, on May 11th, we watched the space shuttle STS-125 Atlantis blast away into space at 5 miles per second on television. Its destination was the Hubble Space Telescope, which circles Earth about once every 97 minutes, hanging 350 miles above us in space. It took two days for the space shuttle Atlantis to reach the Hubble telescope. The astronauts in the shuttle successfully completed their mission of making repairs to the famous telescope and returned safely. What an amazing task that was! We salute the astronauts for this mission and the amazing technology of the 21st century.

Two thousand years ago people who lived in Jerusalem watched a different kind of amazing scene. They watched as our Lord Jesus was taken up to heaven. This taking up was quite different from the rocket shuttle missile. He was taken up on high by the power of God. The scene was recorded in Acts 1:1-11. The event is called the Ascension of Jesus.

Today is Ascension Sunday. 2000 years ago, the people who witnessed this scene of the Lord's ascension expected Him to return after the successful completion of His mission. I would like to share the messages today according to the scripture lesson.

First, Ascension day is not only a day of remembrance of His departing but also of affirming His promise that He will send the Holy Spirit to be with us, and his promise that he will be back to judge the world. On this Ascension day, we gather to reaffirm our hope and vision of the Kingdom of God, eternal life.

For a long time many people forgot Ascension Sunday. Ascension Sunday is celebrated 40 days after Easter, and is one of chief feasts of the Christian year. The Ascension of the Lord is a day of commemoration of that amazing event when Jesus' body departed from us unto heaven.

We are very busy in the life of this world. Still, we need to look up to the sky very often to be reminded of the hope of the eternal world. If there are days when we feel that our days are spent for nothing, wasting and losing time from the days of our life, we are reminded not to be discouraged. Our hope is not on earth. The earth we are standing on is limited. But the sky, where sun, moon and stars are, is unlimited, everlasting and mysterious. The Apostle Paul encouraged us, "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men."

In 1961, a Russian astronaut, Yuri Gagarin returned from a space trip to the moon. He became a very famous man in the world. He was granted the honor of an invitation for audience with two powerful men: the President of the Soviet Union and the Pope.

First he was invited to the Kremlin in Moscow by the President of the Soviet Union. After a dinner, the President asked Gagarin a question. "Tell me honestly, did you see God when you got to the moon?" "Yes!" Gagarin replied. "To tell you the truth, I couldn't see God, but I saw in space such mystery, God must have created it." Then, the President said secretly, "I thought it might be true." "But don't tell this to anybody!" And Gagarin promised not to tell anybody.

A few months later, Gagarin was invited to the Vatican by the Pope. It was a great honor to be invited by the Pope. The Pope treated Gagarin as a special guest. After a dinner along with fine wine, the Pope asked Gagarin a question. "Mr. Gagarin, have you seen God on your trip to the moon?"

"Yes! I was so curious about God so I was looking for God or something. To tell you the truth, I couldn't see God or the Kingdom of God." Then, the Pope said powerlessly, "I thought it might be true" "But don't tell anybody what you said to me." So Gagarin promised not to tell anybody.

This is not a true story. Somebody made up this fabulous story. Actually, Gagarin was a Christian. Gagarin had been baptized into the Orthodox Church as a child. Gagarin was asked if he said, "I don't see any God up here!" He said, "I never said such words."

But this story tells that there are two kinds of unconfident people. Unconfident Christians and unconfident atheists. For Christians, in the scene of the Ascension, we believe confidently in the Kingdom of God.

Second, Jesus our Lord was taken up to heaven in front of gathered believers. Let me reaffirm that there were many people who witnessed Jesus our Lord ascend unto heaven. To be a witness is very important in Christian life. We sometimes need witnesses on our behalf to testify that what we did was right.

The most painful, unforgettable experience in my life occurred in California in 1981. It was right before Christmas, on December 23, 1981. It was early on a Monday morning, and the telephone rang at 5:00 AM. As soon as I picked up the phone, I heard the terrible news that my brother had been murdered, along with his son. They were found in their car along an unfamiliar street in a small town called Banning, California.

My brother was a great musician before he came to the United States. In Korea, he was a noted composer, choir director, organist, and pianist. He was a college lecturer on church music, and he was my greatest supporter. When he was killed, he was only 49 years old. He was murdered by an unknown man with for an unknown reason, in an unfamiliar situation.

Several hundred people gathered at his funeral, many traveling long distances to attend. The local newspaper covered his funeral, including a large photograph of the gathering.

One woman who read the newspaper article was an eye-witness to the murder. She later went to the police and reported what she saw, including the murderer's license plate number. The killer was arrested, tried, convicted, and remains in prison to this day.

At the time of the murder, this killer was an eighteen year-old boy. He was trying to sell drugs to acquire money to spend on his girlfriend. He approached a car that was stuck in a ditch, my brother's car. My brother and his son were waiting for help. This boy pointed his gun at them and demanded money, but they didn't have any money in their pockets. So he shot both my brother and his son, who was just 21 years old.

At first, the witness didn't want to be involved in the homicide incident. But after she read the newspaper article, as a witness she couldn't help to report to what she saw. If the witness didn't appear and report what she saw, the police would have treated the victims as common victims related to a drug deal because the murderer scattered powdered cocaine in the car to camouflage his deed. The role of witnesses is very important. The role of a witness is to testify to what he or she saw or heard.

Lastly, the Great Commission given to us is to testify of the truth of Jesus Christ. We are called as witnesses of the truth of the Lord Jesus. If you believe the truth of the Lord Jesus, you have to be a witness to the truth. To be a true witness is to testify the truth. "Go and tell the truth of the Lord Jesus." This commission, we call evangelism. The church exists to communicate God's Word.

The witness' testimony is powerful. Peter was a great preacher because he was an eye witness of Jesus' resurrection and ascension. The testimony of a witness of truth is more powerful than any other evidence. To preach is harder than to teach, because preaching should be a part of the preacher's own testimony.

It is every Christian's responsibility to share the Good News wherever we go. We are to tell the whole world of Christ, who is coming, his death on the cross, his resurrection, and his promise to return. Someday each of us will give an account to God regarding how seriously we took this responsibility.

The task of evangelism is so important and it is the Great Commission. Evangelism is more than our responsibility; it is our great privilege. We are invited to be a part of bringing people into God's eternal family.

I don't know of a more significant cause to give one's life to. If you knew the cure for cancer, I'm sure you'd do everything you could to get the news out. It would save millions of lives. But you already know something better: You've been given the Gospel of eternal life to share, which is the greatest news of all!

What will be the communication of my life? The Apostle Paul reminded us, "We are therefore Christ' ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us." The Lord Jesus trusted us to be His ambassadors of the truth to the world. The call to be an

ambassador is honorable. Not only our words but also deeds are important to evangelize to the world. To live as an ambassador is an important calling.

Do you have your own mission statement as ambassador? It should include your commitment to share your testimony and the Good News with others. You should also list the life lessons and godly passions you feel God has given you to share with the world.

If you are a parent, part of your mission is to raise your children to know Christ, to help them understand his purposes for their lives, and to send them out on their mission in the world.

A noted preacher, Norman Vincent Peal, once preached a sermon at a funeral for a friend. He said:

Now, if a baby not yet born, still tucked under his mother's heart, could think, he might say to himself: "This is a wonderful place. It's warm. I'm fed. I'm taken care of. I'm secure. This is a great world where I am now. I like it here." And then someone might say to him: "But you're to die out of this place. You're going to another world." The baby would look upon the process of birth as if it were death since it would be the end of the pleasant state he was in. But look what happens to him! He is cradled in loving arms. Soft hands hold him gently. A kind face looks down at him and he loves that face. Everybody that comes near loves him. He's the king of the world he surveys and he comes to love that world, too. It's even better than the one in which he had been before.

Finally, he gets to be an old man and he is told: "You have to die to this world." He protests: "I don't want to die. I love this world. I like the feel of the sun on my face and the cool rain. I love the faces of my wife and children. I've lived here a long time and I love this place. I don't want to die."

But, he does die to this world and then he is born into the next. And look what happens! He awakens to find himself young again. And once again, there are loving-faces to greet him and loving hands to touch him. And even more beautiful, sunlight will be there to surround him, and sweeter music than he's ever heard in his life before will sound in his ears.

And all tears will be wiped from his eyes and he will say: "Why was I so afraid of this thing called death, when, as I now know it is really life instead?"

The Kingdom of God is the message of Ascension. The role of the witness of truth is the most important. To testify is the role of the witness of truth, and that is the Great Commission to us. Testify the truth of Jesus through your words and deeds as an ambassador of Jesus!