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**“Can I Get A Witness?”
A Sermon by Joseph S. Harvard**

Psalm 68:1-10; 32-35; Luke 24:44-53; Acts 1:6-11

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In a few moments we shall affirm our faith using the familiar words of the ancient Apostles Creed, one of the oldest creeds in the Christian church. A line in the Creed is: “He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty.” The idea of Jesus ascending into heaven seems, well, like a throw back to another era when we viewed the world in three levels: heaven, earth and hell. It seems embarrassing like believing the earth is flat. We know so much more as our scientific world view is much more sophisticated.

So in the Christian community we don’t make much over the ascension. It comes forty days after Easter which means it was last Thursday. Did any of you attend an Ascension Day service? Neither did I. Nobody wished me a Happy Ascension Day or sent me an Ascension Day card. It hardly registered on the liturgical radar screen.

I want to say to you this morning; “Happy Ascension Sunday!” I lift up the ascension because I think it has special significance for our lives. If you think of Jesus being lifted up in spaceial terms then it does seem strange. But what the ascension affirms is a theological reality about Jesus Christ!

In Luke the ascension is the way the story ends. His ascension represents a triumphant ending to the life of Jesus. Luke’s Gospel had a resonance among the people and they demanded more. So there had to be a sequel. Luke wrote Acts. In the beginning of Acts, the ascension of Jesus is the beginning of an incredible movement. This movement is still going on. It has seen great

moments and moments of trials and tribulations. The ascension is the linchpin that connects these stories, the life of Jesus and the mission of the church.

In other words the ascension connects our worship and our mission. The early disciples were gathered for worship in Luke's account. Jesus was with them teaching them from scriptures. Then he sent them out but not until he had given them a benediction. He lifted up his hands and he blessed them.

We need a benediction. I read recently about an outstanding counselor, Paul Pruyser, who talked about the difficulty in ending an hour of counseling, a "therapeutic session" as it is often called. It usually ends with a summary of what has been discussed, some assignment and then agreement on the next appointment. "Both therapist and client seem to be reaching for something else," says Pruyser, "something more to say. They are longing, he says, for a benediction, words of blessing as they go their separate ways." (Testimony, Tom Long, p.59). In the traditional Roman Catholic Mass, the last spoken words are: Go, you are dismissed or Go, you are sent. The root of the Latin word for sent and dismissed is the same root for the word for mission.

You are dismissed, you are sent to be engaged in mission. And what is our mission according to this story? It is to be witnesses.

Now if you think the word ascension makes Presbyterians uncomfortable, the word mission gives us real problems. It reminds us of someone who stands on a street corner preaching and asking people, "Are you Saved?"

The word witness simply means to give an account of something you know that is important to you. You are to bear witness in this crazy world to reality of God's steadfast love which never ends, a love that was made known to us in Jesus Christ.

To witness is to give an account of our lives by living what we believe. It often is not easy to bear witness to God's love, God's forgiving, sustaining love in the world in which we live. The word is also the root for the word for martyrdom. It can be difficult but it is essential to our lives as Christians. Allen Verhey talks about it as performing or practicing the texts. We practice in church by asking for forgiveness as we promise to forgive so that we can go out to live merciful lives. We affirm our faith in here so we can remember what we believe out there.

What I want to suggest this morning is that Jesus has given us a benediction and sent us forth to witness. In the heart of this city we are called upon to witness the reality of God's love. Our gathering this afternoon with members of Durham CAN is a witness to values such as community and justice. Our work with the homeless is bearing witness that no one is beyond the pale of God's love and care.

Go and be my witnesses, affirming the reality of God's love that has been let loose in the world in the life and death and resurrection and yes the ascension of Jesus Christ. There is still at work to build a beloved community.

Martin Luther said that when we say affirm that Jesus, "ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father," what are really saying is that the right hand of God is everywhere. Jesus left one place so he could be everywhere in heaven and on earth. Our goal is to meet him where he promised to be, everywhere, among those who suffer and seek to turn their lives around, in the neighborhoods, in cemeteries, in lost causes, in hospitals. We bear witness by reaching out to the poor and helping those in need, by supporting each other, by forgiving and being forgiven. We witness when we practice this good news which is Gospel. We can do it anywhere because God is everywhere.

Let me be a witness this morning and tell you about an experience I had soon after I was out of seminary. I had been in school for a long time, 21 years Carlisle can attest to that fact. Finally, I had recieved a call and had gone to a suburban church in Louisville, Kentucky. I arrived there thinking I knew a lot and came to find out very soon that I had a lot to learn. In other words, I was "wet behind the ears."

On one of the first weeks I was there, I had gone to lunch one weekday with someone from the congregation to get acquainted. When I returned to the church, the parish administrator said a young man stopped by while I was away. He seemed very upset and left me a note. The note said his mother was seriously ill in a hospital in downtown Louisville. He was a Presbyterian from Shelbyville, Kentucky. He wanted to know if I would come and be with him and his mother.

I got in my car and headed downtown. I had never been at this hospital before, nor had I even been on a "pastoral emergency." My friends, I was

scared. What was I going to say to this son and his dying mother? I did not know him. I did not know her. With fear and trembling I found my way to her room. I hesitated before going in to pray and ask for help. I entered the room and introduced myself. It was obvious that the woman was very ill, but she was still conscious.

When I came into the room and told the son that I was the pastor from the church where he left the note, the young man's face lit up. "Thank God you are here!" he said, as if I was about to make a difference. I had no idea what I was going to say. So I drew on the liturgy of the church, "The Lord be with you." And they said, "And also with you." "Lift up your hearts," I said. "We lift them up unto the Lord," they responded. And suddenly, that Lord was not in a grave back in Palestine. He was not beside the sea of Galilee, or sitting in heaven. He was present in a hospital room in Louisville, Kentucky, upholding a dying woman and her son and a scared new minister as he promised he would be. To assume his place as our Lord he had to leave, and now he is everywhere.

We are to bear witness to that reality among the sick, among the poor, among ourselves. And we are to wait for the power of the Holy Spirit to come upon us so that we can be empowered to be God's witnesses.

Brothers and sisters, I am pleased to announce to you this morning that we have a friend in a high place who prays for us, who intercedes for us, who reigns in power for us. Who continually comes among us to dry every tear. To tell us that pain and death are not the end of our lives, that the grave does not have the last word. And we must wait for him to come among us.

In the African American Church, preachers often urge their worshipers to respond to the Word by asking: "Can I get a witness?"

"Now above the sky he is King so that he can be everywhere. Hallelujah! Hallelujah!"

Can I get a witness?

Amen