

Theme: Ascension Gives our Lives Meaning and Mission.

Have you ever wondered why we call this place Mount Olive? If I had to take a guess on why a church like Riverview in Appleton is called Riverview, well I'd have to guess it's because they're in a neighborhood with a view of the river. But our little Mount Olive neighborhood isn't exactly mountainous, nor was the original location in downtown Appleton, nor have I ever seen any olives growing around here or there. No, as was the case for many churches and congregations, our congregation was named after a geographical place in Israel that carried some sort of important significance. That happened pretty frequently so that today we have congregations named after all kinds of places like Bethany, Appleton and Bethlehem, Hortonville, or Mount Calvary in Menasha.

Well, what happened on the Mount of Olives that makes it so significant? Many different things, like when Jesus would retreat there by himself to pray, especially when he took the disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane (see picture) on Maundy Thursday to pray, and there was later betrayed by Judas and arrested. But the very last thing in the life of Jesus that happened on the Mount of Olives was perhaps the most significant and meaningful for us. Jesus ascended into heaven from the Mount of Olives, and so our congregation's name bears a special connection to the festival we celebrate today, Ascension.

We heard St. Luke's account of Jesus ascending into heaven in both our 1st lesson from the book called the Acts of the Apostles and our Gospel lesson, the book of Luke. Both of those accounts were actually written by the same guy, one kind of recapping the other like the start of a new episode. Today, in particular, we focus in on Jesus' words of instruction in Luke 24 that happened sometime either on Easter evening or during the 40 days prior to his Ascension. These words spoken before his Ascension give so much meaning and significance to our lives in the days that follow after his Ascension. That's our theme for today: *Ascension gives our lives 1) Meaning, and 2) Mission.*

First, we take up the meaning that Jesus explains as he looks toward Ascension day and our lives in the days to come. Now if there was ever anyone who was extremely suited to the task of summing up the whole meaning of the Bible and the meaning of our lives, it would be Jesus, the author of life and the Word made flesh. This is what Jesus says, **"This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms. Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures."** (Luke 24:45)

To disciples who were still hazy about why Jesus had to suffer and die at all and who were still caught up in comparing to see which of them was the greatest, or when Jesus might make an earthly kingdom, Jesus boils down all of it, the whole Old Testament, all the prophecies and all the laws, into one crystal clear summary of what God had revealed to them in his word. Here's the bottom line! **"This is what is written; The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day."** (Luke 24:46)

That's the one sentence summary of 66 books of Old Testament that said things like this from Psalm 16:10, **"You will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your faithful one see decay. You make known to me the path of life;"** There we see the promise of the resurrection clearly, but what about why he had to suffer and die in the first place? Isaiah 53:10,11 tells us, **"It was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand. After he has suffered, he will see the light**

of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many and he will bear their iniquities.

The suffering and death of the Son of the living God was caused by nothing other than the sin of his rebellious brothers and sisters, the grumbling children of Israel, the violent and senseless masses of the earth, and especially you and me, each individually the chief of sinners in our own right. And so the message of the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ has always been accompanied by a call to repent. The prophet Hosea closely connects repentance with Jesus' suffering and resurrection in a passage that's never really struck me before, from Hosea 6:1,2, **"Come, let us return to the LORD. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us, that we may live in his presence."**

There we can see Jesus standing in the place of us, being injured, and then being raised! So, Jesus said summed up the meaning of his life and ours, **"The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name."** Martin Luther began to refocus in on this truth when he wrote the 95 Theses, the very first of which said this, **"When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent," he willed the entire life of believer to be one of repentance."**

Now if our whole life is to be one of repentance, we had better understand what that word "repent" means. Luther pictures us every day by the power of the Holy Spirit taking all of our evil deeds and desires and drowning them in order to put them to death, so that a new person rises to live before God. Another hymn writer from our hymnal named Matt Papa describes it this way, **"Christian repentance is a turning away from the world and all of its pleasures toward Christ and all of His superior pleasures. It is a decisive, aggressive, blood-earnest looking at Christ."**¹ To turn from sin and return to the Lord, who beckons for us, just like the prophet Hosea said. This is repentance for the forgiveness of sins. This at the heart and core of the meaning of our life with Jesus.

Before his Ascension, Jesus crystallizes this meaning for our lives and from it gives us 2) our mission. **"Repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things!" (Luke 24:47).** People need to know what the meaning of life is all about—Jesus, dying, rising, repentance, forgiveness—and believe or not, they're more curious than you might think. Just Google, "What is the meaning of life?" and there's 16 billion search results to prove that people want to know.

Now here's my question and challenge to you, "Do you really want people to find out "what the meaning of life is" from Wikipedia while we stand around talking about the weather or about the packers? Or, like Jesus commands, do you want to take a crack at it when your friend is searching for a job and wonders what her purpose in life is. Or when someone you know dies, and their family is trying to make sense of it all. Or when someone wonders why they should even get out of bed in the morning, you have the chance to share true meaning and mission with them. And I'll tell you, whatever real and unrehearsed words that stumble out of your mouth, and fit the situation, and point to Jesus will be better than anything they read on Wikipedia. That's your mission--to witness, to point people to Jesus, so that they turn away from the world and turn toward Jesus Christ, crucified and risen for the forgiveness of sins.

¹ Papa, Matt. Look and Live. *Bethany House*. Bloomington, Minnesota 2014. P. 86

It's a beautiful mission, one that makes life worth the trouble, no matter what role, or relationship, or occupation you have. It gives significance to every word you speak when you talk to someone in the line at the grocery store, or when you meet someone in the midst of their life falling apart. What will you do with those moments? Show them Jesus in some small or big way, a few words sprinkling in like salt or walking with them an extra mile.

A few months ago, we had workshop here, called Everyone Outreach. It was a chance to refocus each and every one of us to see our Ascension-day mission in our lives every day. Since then, I've been seeing and hearing amazing things from you, about how you're making the effort to make conversations with people last one question longer, to give people unhurried time and listen to their needs and fears and meet them with grace in real life.

It's amazing to see what carrying out Jesus' mission does for people who come to know his love for them, to see them find the real meaning of forgiveness. It's also amazing to see the joy it brings to you, as you do it. It will take a bit of pushing past the fear of rejection, and sacrificing a bit of time or hassle, but all of it brings joy and meaning to our efforts.

One of our professors at Martin Luther College, Mark Paustian, the writer of our new hymnal devotional book, *Our Worth to Him*, has such a way with words, I commend all of his books to you. He writes this in one of his older books, *More Prepared to Answer*, "**There is only one up to the task of supplying meaning or satisfying the hunger for significance. I look at Jesus dying for me, rising for me. I know who he is. And I love him. And I know what my life is; from you, for you, to you, my dear God... This is meaning, O Lord, to know how you love me, to take what I've been given to do, and to do it for the love of you.**"²

Ascension gives our lives 1) Meaning and 2) Mission. And just like the angels had to come a prod the disciples to stop standing around looking into the sky, sometimes we need a little prodding to get busy with our mission. As those disciples stood on the Mount of Olives, they could look down and see Jerusalem and think, "Oh yeah, that's where Jesus said to start, beginning at Jerusalem and to the ends of the earth." Well, if this is our Mount of Olives, we probably shouldn't start it Jerusalem. Where do you think Jesus wants us to start. "Oh yeah, right next door, the people who live right there, the people who live right next to you, people who sleep every night in a different house within 75 feet of your pillow."

So how are you going to get busy doing it? I've got my handy-dandy accountability card from Everyone Outreach in my pocket. On my card it says, throw a cookout and invite all the people on my street to my backyard. Cookout season is here. It's time to stop staring at my office walls get to it. If you're not so great with the planning, we've got one in the works for you to use. Sunday June 26 is Family Fest at Mount Olive. We'll have outdoor worship and cookout and bounce equipment and the whole 9 yards. Find somebody to bring with to your Mount of Olives. Let's take the mission we've been given to do, and do for the love of Jesus. Amen.

² Paustian, Mark. *More Prepared to Answer*. Northwestern Publishing House. P. 147 and 148.