

**Ascension Sunday/Graduate Recognition Sunday/June 1, 2014**

**Acts 1:1-11; Luke 24:44-53;**

**Rev. Joel M. Krueger**

*"Ascending to the Presence"*

For three years these men and women, Jesus' disciples, followed him. They heard his teachings, traveled the length of Galilee and Judea, slept where he slept, ate what he ate, drank what he drank, and fasted when he fasted. They learned to pray. They learned, some of them, to cast out demons and to heal, how to proclaim the gospel of repentance and forgiveness.

They were educated with parables, stories about nature, about foreigners who helped the injured, about lost things like coins and sheep and wayward sons who left home only to be welcomed back with open arms and hearts, about seed sown on different soils, about houses built on sand and on rock, about great banquets, mustard seed and leaven. They may not have understood it all but they heard these stories, remembered them and took them in.

They were with him when he calmed storms, walked on water, fed thousands with a few loaves of bread and some fish. They witnessed people being healed by the touch of his hands, by the compassion of his heart, by the word of his mouth, by the faith of others who believed in him. They saw with their very own eyes, how he gave sight to the blind, strength to the lame, hearing to the deaf, healed lepers, those with epilepsy or with illnesses that manifested themselves publicly or privately. They saw him give new opportunities for life to those in need of forgiveness and acceptance. They were witnesses of his giving life to those who were once dead.

His closest followers, heard the very voice of God say of him, at his baptism in the river Jordan and again at the top of a mountain where he was transfigured before them, *"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."* In him, they experienced, God.

And they had followed him to Jerusalem, helped arrange the parade that took him into the city, stood by his side as he overturned tables and disrupted the market place and the religious practice inside the Temple. And they were with him on his last night, at supper as they ate the Passover meal, heard his mystical words as he shared the bread and cup with them, and spoke once again about his departure from them. They would go out to pray with him and despite their spoken allegiance to him, one would betray him, one deny him and all would desert him. Only a handful, mostly women, would dare to gather beneath the cross that would take his life from him.

They had become his closest friends. They were closer than any family any of them had ever belonged to. They loved him.

And when he died, so suddenly, so gruesomely, they were lost.

And two days later, early in the morning, when Mary and a bunch of the women returned from his burial place, with a story about an empty tomb and angels and that he was somehow risen, somehow present, there was nothing but disbelief. But then, later, Simon Peter would experience that presence. And then two of them, walking along a road, would meet a stranger, who, after breaking bread with them, was revealed to them as him! And he disappeared!

It was strange enough that they were experiencing his presence, this one who had died. But it was even stranger that while they knew it was him, they did not recognize him. It was if, somehow, the bodily part of him that they knew, was somehow slipping away.

And their time together seemed to pass so quickly. It seemed like just a day, yet it seemed like 40 days! It was a kind of magical, mystical time, filled with joy and amazement, fear and disbelief, shock and gratitude, questions, and tears and laughter and memories.

And eventually, the time came when his presence seemed to have become so thin, so transparent that he could not help but depart. And like the great Jewish figures before him, like Moses who, before he died and was buried by God on a mountain, would pass the spirit of wisdom on to Joshua to lead the people into the promised land; and Elijah, who was taken up in the whirlwind on the chariots of fire, would pass his spirit onto his disciple Elisha; Jesus would disappear into the clouds, blessing them with the promise of God, the power from on high, the Holy Spirit, which would come upon them a few days later, at Pentecost.

They had known him so well. He was their friend, their confidant, counselor, and their teacher, their "*rabboni*." And like any good teacher, he brought them to the place that they could go on without him. Their graduation, if you will. He had given them all they would need to change the world. He had given them himself.

And as he rose into the clouds, into heaven, into the divine presence, the presence of God, he would no longer be present *with* them, but he would be present *in* them.

In a similar way, on this week of graduation, as Chris and Nancy begin to make their journey into the world and away from the familiarities of home and school and church, those of you who have taught them, who have lived beside them, who have become friends with them, will continue to be in them and they in you. No matter where they go, no matter how far they travel, they will carry some part of First Church and all we have been for them, all we represent, the love and presence of Christ, inside of them.

Likewise, those whom we have recently lost, Bill Abbott and Margie Maddocks, and for those who were close to him, Jim Wescott, and others whom we have known closely and loved deeply, but who are no longer with us in the body, there is a place inside of us, where they will continue to reside, where they are present with us.

The presence of the risen and ascended Christ *is* with us still today. We can, if we choose, know that presence *with* us. We can know that presence *in* us. And we, like the generations of the faithful who have gone before us, can, we must, in his presence, change the world. It is that, for which we are called. It is that for which Christ has blessed us.

And as we prepare to share together at this *communion* table, in what we call the "*Body of Christ*" may we remember that we too are a part of the *body of Christ*, the only bodily presence he has yet in this world. Amen.