

May 29, 2022

Ascension Day (Transferred)

Year C

Rite of Confirmation for Julianna Marie Avelar and Hannah Louise Lassen

Acts 1:1-11

Luke 24:44-52

Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA

Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Name Calling

During our Confirmation classes this year we have been studying the Bible and we have been learning about our ancestors in faith. We have been learning about their lives and stories and seeing how God has worked through them, through their obedience and their disobedience, through their faithfulness and their unfaithfulness, through their successes and their failures.

We have been reminded that their stories are our stories, are our own family histories, since we have been adopted into the family of faith by our baptisms into Jesus Christ. We have seen how God's grace is active in the stories of the Bible, in the lives of our ancestors in faith, and in our own lives.

One other thing that we saw is that many of our ancestors in faith received name changes from God or claimed name changes for themselves in the biblical stories. God gave Abram the name Abraham, Sarai the name Sarah, and Jacob the name Israel. Naomi tried to claim the name Mara for herself, to tell the world about the bitterness of her grief. Jesus gave Simon the name Peter, along with the calling to be a rock for the church.

Of the many things that we learned from these, our ancestors in faith, one of the things that we learned is that encounters with God can change us and can even rename us.

So, I guess it should come as no surprise that during their Confirmation experience, our Confirmands received new names. And I was challenged by the Confirmands and their classmates to include those names in the Confirmation service in some way. Challenge accepted.

Today we are celebrating the Confirmations of Julianna Marie Avelar, also known as “Joob-ih-loob-ah-noob” and Hannah Louise Lassen who has been given the name, “Hoob-ah-noob-ah”.

They were given these names by their Confirmation classmates, John and Adam also known as “Joobn” and “Obbdoobm”. You’ll have to ask the kids why. They’ll explain it better than I ever could.

One thing that I do know is that Joobiloobahnoob and Hoobahnoobah, are names that were bestowed on Julianna and Hannah in a spirit of fellowship and fun. They are names that can be reminders that no matter how hard and heavy life can be, God gives us times and places where we can pray together and laugh together, where we can celebrate the goodness of life together, even as we help each other bear the struggles and burdens of life in a world that crucified its own savior and continues to seek death rather than life.

We are coming to the end of the Easter season. Here at the end, I think that it’s worthwhile for us to remember how it began.

It began with an empty tomb. It began with a woman weeping. It began with confusion and fear and doubt.

And it continued with name calling; with Jesus calling the brokenhearted Mary by name. The joy of Easter really got traction, the

miracle of Easter really took shape with the sound of that voice, that beloved, miraculous voice, turning tears of grief into a cry of joy--

“Mary.”

“Rabbouni!”

The story of Easter is the story of endings turned into new beginnings. Because I feel sure that on the Saturday after Jesus died, the disciples were convinced that they knew all that they needed to know about how their story would end. They knew the finality of the grave.

They knew that if they were exceptionally lucky, they who had been seen in the company of a condemned traitor to the Roman empire would be able to slink back to their old lives back to their nets or their plows or whatever work they had left behind when Jesus said “Follow me.”

If they were exceptionally lucky they would wear their lives away with work and then fall into their graves exhausted; dead and done.

If they weren't lucky, well, then a cross waited for them too.

They knew, though, that one way or another, the grave was waiting for them and that was how their story would end. Just like Jesus.

But, of course, Jesus' story didn't end with the grave. It continued. The tomb was empty. Mary's name was called. Jesus met disciples on the road to Emmaus. He was made known to them in the breaking of the bread. He gave the disciples his peace. He offered his crucified hands and his pierced side to Thomas. He blessed those who hadn't seen and yet still believed. He made breakfast for his followers. Peter was commanded to feed and tend.

The grave was not the end. Jesus' story continued and probably his disciples came to hope that his story would never end, that he would go on

and on, that they would go on and on, having him with them to feed them and talk to them, to assuage their fears, to teach them, to comfort them.

And then this day arrived. Ascension Day.

We have two accounts of Ascension Day in our readings for today, one from the gospel of Luke and one from the book of Acts.

In both of them what happens is basically the same. After a period of conversation with them, some, they must have thought, final words, Jesus ascends into heaven.

But the two accounts differ about what happens next, how the disciples react to what happened.

The gospel of Luke gives the disciples the benefit of the doubt. Like maybe they had learned something after the whole Easter thing.

Like, when Jesus said that he was going to be arrested, suffer, die, and then rise again, he actually meant it, that's actually what happened. So, if he said that they would receive power from God, power from on high, they should trust that. They should believe him. They should not be worried, not be scared, they should know that what looked like an ending, was in fact another beginning.

So, when the story is told in the gospel, the disciples behave in a way, that, based on their previous behavior, in the gospel, is pretty unexpected. They actually believe, they trust, they celebrate the way that God's promises are unfolding in their lives, they stick together and they worship and they wait to see what God will do next.

But when the story is told in the book of Acts, something different happens; the disciples' response is different.

Jesus promises them the Holy Spirit, promises them a mission, promises them a future unlike anything that they could have ever imagined and then Jesus is taken up into heaven.

And they freeze. They stand there, staring. Because they think that they've seen an ending. They think that they've seen the ending, and they can't imagine that anything can come next.

So, it's time for a little bit of name calling. I guess to save time the two men in white robes also known as angels, messengers of God, don't call each disciple individually by name, they address them as a group and ask them, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" And then they remind them of the truth that they have been told. That Jesus' Ascension is not the end. In truth, it is the beginning of something else, the new thing that God is doing in the world and in their lives.

Acts gets around to telling us about the disciples' fellowship, prayer, and worship after Jesus' ascension, in verses that we don't have in today's gospel reading, but it takes some time for them to get there, to figure it out.

Now I want to remind you of something. The gospel of Luke and the book of Acts were written by the same person. History calls that person Luke and debates a bit about who he was, but there's no debate about whether or not he wrote both Luke and Acts. So, why would the same author tell the same story two different ways in two books that he wrote for the same audience, and that he clearly intended to be read consecutively?

Maybe Luke understood something about human nature. Maybe he understood that sometimes people are ready to see the possibility of new beginnings even when things are ending, and sometimes people just get caught up in the endings.

Sometimes it's human nature to get stuck, gazing up into the sky, thinking about what used to be, instead of looking around and seeing what could be, seeing what's next, seeing how God is acting, seeing how God is there for them in the here and now.

So, Luke told the story both ways, filling in the blanks, so that we would know that there's room for both, for those times when we're ready for the future and seize it with joy and worship and for those times when we feel stuck and we need to hear our names and to be reminded that with God, endings tend to turn into new beginnings

It's good to hear this story both ways, on this Ascension Day/Confirmation Day. Julianna and Hannah, or Joobiloobahnoob and Hoobahnoobah or whatever other name you ever go by in your lives, know this, God knows your name, and everything about you. And you are a beloved child of God.

And while today may be the ending of your Confirmation experience, a Confirmation experience that has been that has been marked by a pandemic from its very first day to its very last day, today is, in fact, a new beginning.

Today is the gift of your creator Father, who loved you into being and who knows you by name, today is the gift of Jesus, who saves you and feeds you and has adopted you into this family, this community, and given you all of these ancestors and companions, and today is the gift of the Holy Spirit, stirred up in your lives, for what comes next for you, for this congregation, and for the healing of the world. Thanks be to God. Amen.