
Heavenly Deployment

Luke 24.44 – 53, Acts 1.1 – 11

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on May 24, 2009 by the Revd M. Keith Daniel

This past week the university expressed its annual appreciation for its employees. On Monday employees from across the campus and hospital were treated to ice cream and music outside on the main quad. I devoured a tasty nutty, chocolaty ice cream bar and caught up with a friend who works in the hospital. It's nice to be appreciated. Duke is really a great place to work. It may not be Disney, but it is a Gothic Wonderland.

From a one room school house approximately one hundred miles away in Randolph County in 1891 to a sprawling university campus today that boasts 10 schools (Terry Sanford School of Public Policy being the newest addition), three hospitals, health care facilities, clinics, and corporate operations spread throughout North Carolina and Virginia, a slew of research facilities, and 31,000+ employees, Duke is a mighty fine place to work. I am not just saying that because I used to work in HR. I am saying that because I work at Duke Chapel. You might say I am a bit biased.

As a former Human Resource practitioner in the department of Learning and Organization Development, I had the joy of gathering in an upper room with about 40 people. Really, it was an upper room. Every two weeks in the second floor conference room in Bay B of the Erwin Mill building, I stood before a packed room of new university employees to officially welcome and orient them to Duke. New employee orientation was a half day event delivered in three parts. After a welcome greeting and introductory video, Part 1 entailed a review of the university's history and humble beginnings to its rapid rise to world class status in higher education and health care. Part 2 involved a serious discussion of the University's guiding principles of learning, trustworthiness, respect, diversity and teamwork. The third and final part was a review and explanation of Duke's generous employee benefits package. This part was handled by two other HR colleagues. They were the real stars of the show. Most people came eager to learn more and sign up for their benefits. The session evaluations consistently came back with suggestions to shorten the event to get quicker to the benefits. Although the discussion of the guiding principles was conducted in an interactive manner, most folks figured themselves to be Robert Fulghum. They had learned all they needed to know about such matters in kindergarten.

To be oriented is to be pointed in a particular direction, to get one's bearings. However, the transitive form of the term orient in Latin is *oriri* meaning to rise. In today's Ascension gospel lesson, the apostles suddenly find themselves without direction and deeply disoriented after Jesus' crucifixion. They're even more distraught when they discover his body is missing. The disciples have lost their bearings on life. The promise of a bright future that they presumed was to be an earthly rebuilding of the kingdom of Israel is clouded in disappointment and disbelief. Jesus returns to orient, to raise the apostles out of their despair, to physically point them toward the kingdom he had prepared for them to enter. Was this not his purpose for coming in the first place?

The heavenly kingdom of God is not as simple as kindergarten. The apostles need a much higher education. So, our risen Lord walks some extra miles in their shoes and enjoys a few more meals at their table. Jesus is eager for them to enjoy their full benefits as laborers in God's vineyard, yet he knows it will require more than half a day. According to Luke he journeys with them for 40 days. Like new Duke employees the disciples had to sit through a review of kingdom history, revisit the guiding principles of the kingdom, and wait to fully receive God's glorious benefits.

First, Jesus retells His-story. Jesus recounts what has been prophesied about himself and his eternal reign in glory. He is careful not to leave out any important details. For he knows that belief will come as they hear His-story again for the first time. He sets their hearts on fire as he speaks, touches, eats and drinks with them. Jesus reminds the apostles that his suffering and death was to fulfill Scripture. In fulfilling the Scriptures, Christ finished his earthly work and through his ascension the disciples were to go forth into new employment. Yet, they had to wait on the Lord to renew their minds and their strength. Jesus knows that in order for the disciples to be successful in their new assignment as witnesses to the ends of the earth, they have to fully comprehend history and be prepared to live out the Lord's guiding principles.

During Jesus' own 40 day orientation in the wilderness he overcomes the first temptation to turn stones into bread by demonstrating his comprehension of His-story. His story is the story of the children of Israel traveling through the wilderness and learning to live not by manna alone but by every word of God. His story is about learning to trust God at all times and all places. His story is about yielding control to make our lives come out right in our own sight.

In the retelling of Jesus' story we come to know the heart of God, and we witness God's guiding principles embodied in Jesus. Jesus' story is a story of *learning*. Jesus said, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." In Jesus' story we learn that through His resurrection and ascension we become more than conquerors. Christ demonstrates how to overcome the temptations of the flesh by walking in the Spirit. To walk by faith, and not by sight. Jesus' story is one of God's *trustworthiness* to fulfill His promises to those who believe. It is a story of putting the needs of another ahead of our own which is the ultimate show of *respect*. It is a story of reaching *diverse* peoples and nations and bringing them together as a *team* or community into Christ's body holding each other accountable to serve and embrace our common welfare and interdependence.

We are apt to forget how to truly live principle-centered lives especially when adversity comes, things don't go our way, our expectations are not met, or when we have been let down by someone or some thing. We often need to be reminded that there are a great many things we have no control over. Yet, our technologically advanced culture deludes us into thinking we can make things come out just the way they ought to. When you boil it all down, there is nothing new under the sun. The vanity and striving for the wind we are witnessing in the midst of collapses and ruin across personal, private, and corporate sectors of our societies are a result of denial, ignorance, and loss of our biblical history. We all need to be locked up. Locked up together in an upper room somewhere with nothing but a Bible and some broiled fish reviewing and rehearsing all that God has done in and through Jesus Christ reconciling the world to himself in order that we might be reconciled to one another. As Christ's disciples we need our minds restored with this precious memory of Christ's orientation.

The economic depression may be the least of our worries compared to the vast number of people who are clinically depressed. Too many are trapped in the lie that things have to work out exactly a certain way and by a certain time. We are increasingly becoming more and more impatient people. We are impatient with the world, impatient with one another, and even impatient with ourselves. Yet, a close review of our salvation history reveals that the forth-telling of prophecy speaks of a slow and steady work of God restoring and reconciling creation to himself through the humiliation and subsequent exaltation of Jesus.

I mentioned at the outset that we began new employee orientation by showing a video. That video featured five Duke employees describing why Duke was such a great place to work. One of those employees named Faye started out as a housekeeper and worked her way up the ranks by taking advantage of Duke's educational benefits. Several of her family members work at Duke. Faye enjoys interacting with international students through her job, and she loves art. The video shows her touring the Duke art museum and stopping in front of a magnificent painting of a host of angels. She pauses and says, "This is my favorite one, because I know that angels are always watching over me."

Angels appear in the first two chapters of Luke. The angel Gabriel is deployed to deliver God's message to Zechariah. His second deployment is to Mary when he delivers the good news that God has found favor with her and that the son she was to bear would reign from David's throne over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom would never end. And, as the shepherds watched over their flock, an angel of the Lord appeared to announce the birth of their king. Luke writes, "And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host (translated *army* in the Greek) praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those who he favors!" (vv. 13-14).

In the third temptation of Christ, Satan insinuates that the angels would protect him if he leapt from the pinnacle of the Temple to prove his deity. Though Jesus is the king and crown of all creation, he embodies the penultimate guiding principle by wrapping himself completely in humanity. Jesus said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." Humility is the principle that governs Jesus' heart. He knows his place in God's story. Though being in the very nature of God, he did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage. Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name. When Christ time comes to be lifted up from the earth another heavenly deployment occurs.

If we're not careful, we may mistake Jesus' story to be all about us. We may be especially prideful when we hold high status, earn high income and have major influence on the direction of our lives and others. Many have died jostling for position, hungering for promotion, and climbing the proverbial corporate ladder only to discover the ladder leans on a false promise or a promise that simply could not be kept. Principles often get tossed out when opportunities are scarce, resources limited, and priorities shift. Principles are good. But, humanity cannot live by good principles alone. Humanity needs a person, and that person is Jesus Christ.

We see the angels attend to Jesus at the end of his 40 days in the wilderness in Mark's gospel. Luke doesn't mention the angels, instead he records Jesus returning to Galilee in the power of the spirit preaching from Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me." The clothing of God's spirit upon his children is God's benefits package. God's benefits package comes in the form of his divine being and that being the Holy Spirit.

Like the angels that God dispatched with a message of expectancy and hope for the coming Messiah, Christ commission the apostles and deploys the Holy Spirit empowering them to carry the Gospel message to the ends of the earth.

God in Christ sends us, his disciples into the world fully oriented and filled with his Spirit. We cannot learn, tell the truth, be trusted, demonstrate respect, or live in faithful community without the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, we cannot witness the miraculous love of the Father to a dieing world if the spirit of the Lord is not upon us. Like the disciples after Christ's death, none of us knows what the future holds. In fact, the future looks more and more bleak as all creation groans in the agonies of war torn nations, domestic violence, terrorism, fear and hatred. No place can be kept secure from attack, not even our Chapel website which has been hacked not once but twice, it's difficult to remain hopeful and clinging to the joy of our salvation by grace through Christ.

Yet, we must remember that Jesus never stops working on our behalf. As he ascends he sends the Paraclete, an advocate and comforter. He offers us much more than a few good guiding principles to live by. He deploys the Guide—The Holy Spirit to teach us everything and remind us of what our Master said. This guide will lead us into all truth, and fill us with power to live that truth in a world of trouble and tribulations.

Tomorrow we will pause to remember all those who were deployed and died in battle for the freedom we enjoy. Deploy means to extend, to place in battle formation. It also means to spread out and utilize for a deliberate purpose. It derives from the French word *déployer* literally meaning to unfold. The unfolding of our salvation history reveals that we the children of God have been given the Holy Spirit. And, now we can enjoy the benefits that no earthly employer can offer. For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. Righteousness because Christ restores us into right relationship with the Father as he is seated upon God's throne and forever intercedes on our behalf. Peace because Jesus has defeated the Evil one once and for all. And, joy because Easter morning has come, and we don't have to stare into the heavens wondering from where and from whom are help comes? Amen.