***ETERNAL LIVING***

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Texts: Acts 1:1-12 and 1 John 5:9-13

 A distraught senior citizen who shall remain nameless phoned her doctor’s office. After waiting on hold for several minutes, the doctor came on the line. “Is it true,” she asked, “that the medication you prescribed for me has to be taken for the rest of my life?” “Yes, I’m afraid so,” the doctor told her. There was a long pause before the woman replied. ” I’m wondering then, just how serious is my condition, because the prescription is marked, ‘NO REFILLS’?”

 There are a variety of experiences that may trigger thoughts about the end of life and eternal life. It need not be a dire diagnosis, a NO REFILLS prescription, a brush with death, or a noteworthy birthday that brings that reality to mind. We are finite creatures and every now and then our finitude creeps up and slaps us in the face to remind us that we will not live forever. We are mortal beings who will one day come to the end of our mortal days. The Good News of the Gospel is that we need not fear that end, need not live in dread of that day, for the love of God is greater than death. Beyond our last breath, the God who gave us life still cares for us, still loves us, still has a place for us in that house not made with hands eternal in the heavens! That divine assurance is intended, not to focus our eyes upon some glorious heavenly future, but to free us to live more faithful lives now, to ease our angst of being finite creatures so that we can live more fully into the life God created us to live. Resurrection promises are not just about some future life in heaven after our earthly death, but about freeing us to live out our days without fear of what may come. The problem is that the glory of those resurrection promises make some Christians so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good!

 That was never the intent of the Good News of Resurrection – to turn our minds away from this world toward some heavenly future. The promise of eternal life is intended to free us to live faithfully and joyfully now. The goal of the Christian life is not to get to heaven – we don’t earn our way there; that glorious future lies solely in God’s hands. The goal of the Christian life is to live faithfully here and now as Jesus called us to do, as Jesus showed us how to do – by loving God and loving our neighbors, by serving others in service to God, by willingly giving up our selfish ways to live into God’s self-sacrificing way.

 When John writes of eternal life in that passage we heard this morning, he is not referring just to that time after our mortal lives have ended. For John, all of life, present and future, is embraced by eternal life. Eternal life begins now and stretches beyond death; it is life that is loving and self-giving as Jesus showed us. It is life under the reign of God, and as Luke affirms in his description of Jesus’ Ascension, that reign has already begun. In looking back to Jesus’ crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, John is bearing witness to the hope we hold as those who live under the reign of God now and always, a reign that transcends life and death.

 We recall the past: Jesus’ life, death and resurrection; we look ahead to the future and the fulfillment of the heavenly promises of God; but we live in the present, a present God has given us to enjoy and to make the most of as good neighbors, loving servants, and faithful disciples. And that challenge is more than enough for us!

 It is not easy to live faithfully in the present when there is so much that is going awry in the world, in our nation, and in our own lives:

 when wars in Gaza and Ukraine are claiming more innocent lives and

 sparking anti-Semitic and anti-Palestinian rhetoric and actions;

 when tornados and floods are a weekly event as climate change exacts its toll on our nation and world;

 when a friend is diagnosed with cancer or a family member suddenly dies or the frustrations of a job mount up;

 when a friendship fractures or a marriage is on the rocks or your

 world is turned upside down by events beyond your control.

It is not easy to live in the present when the present seems so messy and frustrating and fraught with peril. Yet that is what we are called to do, called to live faithfully now and into the future.

 As part of our confession of faith in the Apostles’ Creed we say: “*He ascended into heaven…*” Those four words express a key element of our faith, sandwiched between the affirmation of Jesus’ resurrection on the third day and his seat at the right hand of God from whence “*he shall come to judge the living and the dead*.” Yet, Jesus’ ascension is little remembered by most of us and hardly even noticed in our Protestant tradition. I daresay all of you know that today is Mother’s Day, but how many of you knew that Ascension Day was last Thursday? It doesn’t help that it moves around on the calendar, falling 40 days after Easter in the middle of the week, and so is oft-forgotten. Yet Jesus’ ascension is key to that call to live faithfully, lovingly, and joyfully in the turbulent present.

 When we say that Jesus ascended into heaven, we recall that event recorded by Luke in the reading from Acts this morning, that moment when the risen Jesus left the disciples and the bounds of earth to be lifted out of sight in a cloud. We might have expected a more dramatic exit for the Son of God – something akin to the exit by Elijah in a chariot of fire in the midst of a whirlwind! But as with much of Jesus’ ministry, there are few pyrotechnics surrounding him – just a cloud like that which appeared on the mountaintop at the Transfiguration, a cloud like the one that settled on the tent in the wilderness when Moses spoke with God, a cloud in which God was present. Jesus ascends from the disciples here on earth to the God who had sent him.

 When we say, “*He ascended into heaven and is seated on the right of God the Father Almighty*,” we are declaring that the risen Jesus ascends ***from*** the earth and ascends ***to*** the throne of God from which he reigns over all for eternity. It is that affirmation, that the reign of Christ has begun and is a present reality in our lives, that gives us strength with which to live in the present and into the future. Eternal life is not just a future reality which we await; it is a present reality in which we live. It is not just eternal life but eternal living under the reign of the risen Christ. Despite all that goes awry in the world that might suggest otherwise, the reign of Christ has begun. Like the disciples we may wonder when the messiness of the world will get straightened out and all will be restored to the way God intended it to be. Jesus says it is not for us to know that time, but until that day, disciples have a role to play here and now under the reign of God, a role as witnesses to Jesus to the ends of the earth, or as John casts it – bearing testimony to the good news even as God’s testimony to us in those glorious actions and through the work of the Spirit has inspired in us faith.

 The last words Luke records Jesus saying to the disciples are these: “*You will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth*.” That is what they did, and that is who we are called to be:

 faithful witnesses for Jesus, the crucified, risen, ascended, and reigning Lord,

 witnesses who tell his story and bear his good news to the world,

 witnesses who live with our eyes cast not just to some eternal future, but around us to the needs of the present.

After Jesus’ ascension, two angels asked the disciples why they kept standing there looking up to heaven. They might well ask the same of us. Why stand looking toward some future heavenly home when there is so much work to be done in the here and now? Our call lies in the present – a present in which we are to live and serve as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

 An older man was on the operating table awaiting surgery. His son, a renowned surgeon, was to perform the operation. As he was about to receive the anesthesia, the father asked to speak with his son. “*Yes, Dad, what is it?*” asked the concerned young doctor. “*Son, don’t be nervous*,” said the father. “*Do your best, and remember: if it doesn’t go well, if something happens to me, your mother is going to come and live with you and your wife.*”

 There are lots of ways to be motivated to do well in the present. Take whatever motivation you need – recalling Jesus’ commission to his disciples or following the example of a saint you knew, looking toward a heavenly future or seeing the needs of your neighbors, and do your best to live well, serve well, witness well, love well in the here and now, on this Mother’s Day and Ascension Day and every other day, for that is what we are called to do and who we are called to be: witnesses to Jesus Christ who was raised on the third day, ascended into heaven, and is seated on the right hand of God the Father Almighty. We are his witnesses to the ends of the earth, promised eternal life and called to eternal living that begins now! Amen