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- Jessica: Welcome to Lectionary Kick-start.
We're sparking your thoughts for Sunday as you plan your sermon or teaching lesson.
I'm your host and producer, Jessica Bordeleau, here with Dr. David Schmitt and Dr. Peter Nafzger.
They're both professors of homiletics here at Concordia Seminary St. Louis.
You can hear all about us in our introductory episode, but trust me, they are pretty decent preachers.
All right, guys, let's get started.
David, where are we in the church here?
- David: Well, it is the seventh Sunday of Easter, but if you have been paying attention, Thursday was Ascension Day.
And so I, in the parish, if we didn't have an Ascension Day service, I would transfer the celebration of the Ascension to the seventh Sunday of Easter.
- Peter: Yeah, I did the same.
You know, there's, there's, the Ascension's kind of an important...
- David: It is a huge...
- Peter: We confess in the creed every week.
It's a huge piece in the narrative of the scriptures.
And it just seemed to me as I did the same thing in the parish, seemed to me like this is something that if you can't have a Thursday service, then you should treat it on Sunday.
- David: Okay.
So Ascension Day would be the readings.
- Jessica: Sounds good.
And what are the texts that go with Ascension Day?
- Peter: That would be Acts chapter 1, 1 Peter 4, and then a little bit from 5, Luke chapter 24, and Psalm 47.
- Jessica: As always, I ask each of you to tell me which text you would choose to preach about.
To determine who goes first, our reading for today says that our adversary, the devil, prowls like a roaring lion.
Which animal are you most afraid of?
- Peter: I think I, I, I, I'm going to have to say the hawk.
- Jessica: Oh.
A little hawk?
- Peter: No, they're not little.

They're not little.
We used to have chickens.
And these hawks are fierce and they're fearless.
We watched hawks swoop down, pick up our baby chick, and then take it up to the branch right above us and rip it to shreds in front of us.

David: Oh, my gosh.

Peter: Oh, yeah.

Jessica: That's terrible.

David: Man.

Peter: Yeah.
I didn't, I wasn't afraid of hawks until we had chickens.
Now I'm afraid of hawks.

David: Wow.

Jessica: Oh, that's awful.

David: I don't like monkeys.
I really don't.
I don't.
I don't.
I don't.
I just don't like them.
No.
The primate house?
I do not, I don't know.
I do not like them.
Sam, I am.
I do not like them.

Peter: You never know what they're thinking.
You get the feeling they're thinking.

David: Oh, man.
Yeah.
Yeah.

Jessica: Nice.
There you go.
Once I took my kids to a zoo that was kind of a remote, not mainline zoo, and the animals were very close to you, like maybe closer than they shouldn't have been.
And there was a tiger on the other side of the plexiglass.
And so my son, who only went up a little bit past the plexiglass, was standing next to me, and this lion was seriously like 20 feet away.

He was looking at my son, like with intensely.
And some kind of primal maternal instinct, like whooped.
I like stepped between the plexiglass and my son.
I'm like, we need to go.
Monkeys, hawks, tigers, mammals.
We'll go with mammals.
David, you win.
You get to go first.

David: Okay.
Great.
So I would preach on the gospel reading, Luke 24.
I was driving into work yesterday and...

Jessica: You saw a monkey?

David: I didn't see monkeys.
No, will you not talk about that?
I saw the sunrise and it was absolutely gorgeous.
I just, the colors in the sky, it was like, you know,
you're looking at it and you're like, you could paint that.
And then somebody would say, oh, that's not real.

Peter: Right.

David: Because it's so beautiful.

Peter: So colorful.

David: So beautiful.
And as I'm driving, I'm admiring the sunrise.
And then all of a sudden I have to pass under this really,
really, really ugly bridge that's under construction.
And I, I just, it was a, it was a real powerful moment for
me for some reason where I saw this beauty of God's creation.
And then the, the horror of our own creation, the ugly bridge.
And it, it kind of, that, that juxtaposition, when I read this text,
that juxtaposition came into my mind because the
disciples have been through something traumatic.
They have watched the crucifixion of, of their Lord.
They have denied him.
They have betrayed him.
They have run away.
They have seen kind of the really nasty side of our human nature.
And very traumatic.
And yet, in the background now, after the resurrection of Christ,
we see this glorious vision of what God has done.
And that this was part of God's merciful intervention for us.
It's part of God's movement of us toward a new creation.

And it's just a, it's kind of a, a fascinating moment when you think about what was going on in the lives of the disciples, the things they have witnessed, and then the joy and the beauty of this experience of Jesus, and then his ascending into heaven. And so it's, um, something that struck me as I was reading this text. So Jessica, if you could read about the ascension, uh, verse 50 through 53.

Jessica: Wow.
That made it sound more exciting than I realized.
That's the, wow.
Never thought about the ascension like that.
All right.
And he led them out as far as Bethany and lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy and were continually in the temple blessing God.

David: I love that line.
While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. It's not that he decided to ascend into heaven.
He was carried up into heaven.
So I, who's carrying him?
I don't know, but he's being carried up into heaven.
And as he's being carried up into heaven, his hands are extended in blessing. And so think about that.
The last image that you see of your Lord is him blessing you.
And I just, I just love that idea.
I mean, I, I'm one of these people who, if you, um, if you come over and you visit me and then you leave, I'm going to stand at that door until you drive away and I can't see you anymore.
I do.
I stand at the door and I wave because I want the last image you see of me, not to be me shutting the door on you, but to me, me waving at you.
Drop your kids off at college, right?
What are you like just kind of driving away and putting in your earbuds?

Peter: No, you totally, you totally want to have a nice image to carry for them and for you to carry forward.

David: Yes.
And so that's what Jesus does is he gives us this beautiful image.
And I think the two things that I see here is that the blessing of Jesus is powerful. Um, he is ascending to the right hand of God.
Uh, he is ruling over all things.
And when we think about how he's ruling over all things, he's not pointing at us. He's blessing us.

Peter: He's not turning away from us.

David: He's not turning away from us.
Like, gosh, he's not, he's not wiping his hands.
Glad I got that done.
You know, it's no, he's, he's blessing us.
You know, he died because of our crucifixion of him.
He rose from the dead and now he is in control of all things.
And there's nothing that will ever be able to separate you from his love that is operative in your life and ruling over this world.
And so the, the, so the last image we get of Jesus, number one, is that his blessing is personal.
That, I mean, it's really interesting, right?
That he takes his body with him into heaven.
You think about that.
So I remember a pastor who once said to me that, that ascension is Christmas in heaven.
So Christmas on earth is God coming down and taking on flesh.
Ascension is Christmas in heaven.
Jesus bringing flesh up into heaven, right?
That all of a sudden he's, it's, it's personal.
He's, he's retaining his body.
He's not, you know, kind of like in a Gnostic way, discarding of the body that the only thing that matters is your spirit and let's float on clouds.
He's retaining his body.
It's, it's personal.
This is the, you know, this is the body he took on, the body he was given as he was born of the Virgin Mary.
And, and he's taking that with him in heaven and to heaven with him.
And so I think we have a God who understands our physical nature.
He understands aging.
He understands the nature of what it's like to be in a body and only be able to do certain things because your body can only do so much, right?
He's, he understands all of that.
And so he's got a blessing that is powerful and that is personal.
And that's the last thing we see as he's carried away from us into heaven, knowing that this one who is, who, who has saved us is now at the right hand of God and he is blessing us in a powerful and personal way.

Peter: That, that ties nicely with the, uh, the reading from Acts when the two men say, he will see him as he departed.

David: Yeah.

Peter: And so, you know, they're, you know, pair that with this blessing scene. He's leaving in blessing and they're expecting him to return in blessing.

David: Right, right.

Jessica: That's really beautiful.

But you have to acknowledge all of the practical questions that will come from us.
How long will he have his body?
Does he still have his body?
How can he be my heart, in my heart, if he has a physical body?
No, for real, people will think about this.
So how long is that body going to last?
Like, is this real for eternity?

David: Well, it's a resurrected body, right?
Yeah.

Peter: Well, this is where we actually talked about this in my congregation.
We're studying the book of Acts, uh, during the season of Easter.
And we were talking about these very things and somebody made the comment,
the resurrection kind of changes all the rules.
You know, Jesus, after the resurrection, his body can go through doors, disappear.
Apparently, half the time, more than half
the time, the disciples don't recognize him.

David: He can still eat, give him some fish.

Peter: He can still eat.
You know, he's...
So all these things, and we just can't grasp it.
So all the questions that we would normally have about a body or a human
after the resurrection, kind of the rules are kaput.
And so we just have to pay attention to Jesus and see what
he gives us and then let our questions fall into place there.

David: Well, so often I hear people talk about, you know,
after death, they envision us as spirits, right?

Jessica: Angels floating on the clouds with harps.

David: Right.
Something like that, right?
Yeah, something like that.
And, and it's, um, you know, and Paul has that very, very strange passage about,
you know, different bodies, you know, the animals have
certain kind of flesh and humans have different kind of flesh.
And what's sown is not what is raised.
It's much different.
It's the same body, but a different body.
So there's, there's, uh, you know, so much mystery that's involved in these things.
And I guess, you know, yeah, there's a, there's a lot of mystery there,
but there is certainty, certainty that he's powerful
and certainty that he will always be personal.

Peter: Well, that's what I appreciate about your idea for

the sermon, Dave, is that there is a lot of mystery.
And when you come across a lot of mystery, a
good move is to go to what's not mysterious.

David: Right.
Yeah.

Peter: And what's not mysterious is that Jesus was blessing.

David: Yes.

Peter: And that he's blessing them powerfully and in this personal way.
And that's, that you can count on.

Jessica: And that's hopeful for me to know that that's what will happen to me,
that I won't just be a floating spirit, but that in whatever way the new creation
and the new rules play it out, Jesus was actually physically there.
So I will be too.
I'll still be me in some way.

David: Although I would be interested in what instrument you got.

Jessica: Hopefully a microphone.
And now it's time for the Ask Jessica jar, the part of the show where we pick a
question from the jar and I answer it from the perspective of a person in the pew.
David, pick a question, a physical question that you
can actually hold and touch on that piece of paper.

David: I know.
Okay.
What might a visiting guest take away from this sermon?

Jessica: Oh, yes.
This would be a good one for a visiting guest.
Thinking of a beautiful sunset and then it being gone
and thinking about what your future would be for you.
Because like you said, if Christians have varying ideas of what heaven will be like,
a visiting stranger might have who knows what ideas.
And so for them to hear, and you know, God's people will be with him in a way,
in a new rules kind of way that's still physical.
I think that would be exciting.
And I hope that that would spur on questions from them.
Or give them just a little peek of something different.
Because you don't hear that.
Where do you hear that from anyone else?

David: Yeah, the ascension is not something we talk about a lot.
Right.

Peter: Ironically, because we confess it every Sunday.

David: I know.
Yeah, yeah.
But yeah, so it does, it offers us, you know, they might be familiar with some things from the life of Jesus, but they might not be familiar with that.

Jessica: Right.
Right.
Yeah.
Yeah, no, that would be great.
Peter, what about you?
What would you preach on?

Peter: Well, I've been, as you guys know, working through the book of Acts in this season of Easter. I've been thinking about how the resurrection of Jesus changes everything. It changes our hopes, it changes our beliefs, it changes our thinking, and it changes our acting. We go from, the disciples went from hiding in fear to courageous actions as the body of Christ. And so each text this season I've been thinking about, and we kind of come to the end here with the Acts 1 reading about the ascension. And in a way, you know, sometimes there's those movies that kind of go back to the beginning at the end of the movie kind of thing. That's kind of what this reading does. It goes back to the beginning, especially if you're going to celebrate Ascension Day. It goes back to kind of the beginning of the Christian life after Jesus by recalling the ascension of Jesus. And so it's kind of, we've talked about the joy of dishonor and the promise for those far off, the life we share, the risk we take, the world we engage. And now we're going to kind of return to, well, what's the beginning of all this? And that's Jesus, well, Jesus' departure. You know, Christ is risen. He's risen indeed. Christ is also ascended. And what does that look like for us now? And so I'd like to get us started by reading just verse 10 and 11. Jessica, if you would read that from Acts chapter 1. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in

Jessica: white robes and said, Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus who was taken up from you into heaven will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.

Peter: All right.
So I'm picturing the disciples here.
And, you know, it's been a whirlwind.
Things have kind of calmed down just a little bit since the resurrection.
But now he's leaving.

And he's leaving in this wonderful blessing that he's giving them from Luke's gospel.
But he's departing.
And what the two men in white say to him would be kind of the orientation for this whole sermon.
Why do you stand there looking into heaven?
And he will come in the same way as you saw him go.
Now, that's going to shape everything the disciples do throughout the book of Acts.
It's going to shape what every Christian does their entire lives.
If it's true that this Jesus who departed in blessing is going to come back in the same way, well, that just changes everything.
You know, clearly the disciples don't understand what's going on.
You know, they ask him in verse 6, are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel?

David: Right.

Peter: You know, even after he rises, they still can't quite imagine that everything's different in light of the resurrection.
And so what I want to think about is what it means for the return of Jesus to be our constant anticipation.
So that would be kind of the theme for this sermon, our constant anticipation.

David: That's kind of nice.
We always think about that at the end of the church and in Advent, right?
But now we're doing it in Eastertide.
That's nice.

Peter: Yeah, I mean, it's the kind of thing that I think has a big impact on what we do all the time.
I mean, it should, of course.
And so what I maybe would do in this sermon is either compare and contrast, or maybe with the logic of classification, think about what does it mean to be in constant anticipation.
And I would set it against a couple alternatives that sometimes I see in the church, I see sometimes in my own heart, I see challenges following Jesus.

David: But constant anticipation of something good.
Is that what you're thinking of?

Peter: Well, our constant anticipation... I'm going to... here's what I'm going to do.

David: Okay.

Peter: And I haven't sort out exactly the language.
I've still got to wordsmith this, but I'm thinking about... I'll just lay them out there, and then I'll look at each one.

David: Okay.

Peter: I'm looking at acts of desperation, acts of resignation, and acts of anticipation.

David: Okay.

Peter: Okay?

Because I'm kind of slowing down the disciples'

question, are you going to restore Israel?

You know, they're kind of expecting this.

And when he doesn't do it the way they think, you kind of have three options.

Either you're going to be in desperation, or you're going

to be in resignation, or you're going to be in anticipation.

So let me just say a couple of things about each of those.

So I see...

David: I usually fall into resignations.

Peter: Okay.

David: So I'm already predicting that's where I'm going to see myself.

Peter: Okay.

David: So let's hear.

Peter: Well, let's start with acts of desperation.

David: Okay.

Peter: You know, I look around at the church's response to a world that is increasingly opposed, or maybe just ambivalent, but not supportive of a Christian worldview.

David: Things have shifted.

Peter: Things have changed.

And I see sometimes acts of desperation.

And what I mean by desperation is acts of fear, acts of trying to grab whatever power you can grab and take control, kind of use whatever means we have, righteous or unrighteous, to get to the end that we believe is right and true.

And I see a lot of desperation, especially as the church shrinks in significance.

Um, and I can imagine the disciples, after Jesus leaves, uh, being tempted toward acts of desperation where they feel like they have to take things into their own hands.

Um, maybe you'd put it like this, uh, when you engage in acts of desperation, you are tempted to overestimate how much we need to do.

Um, and you feel like, well, we, we, we do whatever we got to do.

Uh, and that's, that's not the kind of anticipation I'm thinking.

David: Yeah.

I mean, you could have the right vision.

Peter: Right.

David: But you're just trying to implement it yourself rather than trusting that it's God's vision and God's work.

Peter: Right.

David: Okay.

Peter: And the, and the key really behind this whole thing is, is kind of a fear, an attitude of fear.
And I just, I see a lot of fear in my own heart.
I see a lot of fear among Christians.
I think that's a real powerful temptation.
Um, on the other hand, enter Dave, you've got acts of resignation and resignation would not come so much from fear as much as, well, you know, what good, what good could I possibly do?
What good could the church do?
The forces of evil are so great.
Um, kind of, you just give up.
Maybe, maybe in a way there's a sense of apathy here.
Um, and maybe this would be kind of to underestimate, uh, the work that God has given us to do or that God has promised to do through the work we do, or to underestimate the results that might come from what we do, just because it's not kind of what we expected Jesus to be doing.

David: Right.
And also to, I mean, cause I know this one very well.

Peter: Yes.
Do tell.
Do tell.

David: Well, to say, you know, God is God and he's going to do what he wants to do.

Peter: Yeah.

David: And to not acknowledge that God has called me or sent me or gifted me for doing things in his kingdom.
But, you know, you kind of lay that aside and it's like, well, whatever, you know?

Peter: Yeah.
Um, yeah.
And, and I think that's in some ways as strong.
I mean, in some ways you kind of toggle back and forth sometimes.

David: I was afraid you were going to say that's worse.
Well, it is, Dave.

Peter: Well, they're, they're, they're equally, they're equally, uh, uh, unhelpful.
I'll just put it that way.

Um, and so you've got these acts of desperation at times, acts of resignation sometimes, but then I want to return to this acts of anticipation.

Now, if it's true that Jesus is going to come back the way he left, that means he's coming back in power. He's coming back.

I mean, kind of the same language used in the, the first part, Dave, that he's coming back in power and he's coming back personally for his people, uh, and for all people.

And, uh, because we anticipate that, that gives us the, uh, the vision to be faithful with, with what God has given us.

And that means we don't have to understand how it's all going to come together.

Uh, but we don't need to be, uh, resigned to the fact that it's, there's no use to what we do as Christians and as the church.

Um, because this Jesus who has overcome sin, death, and the devil through his death and resurrection, uh, even now reigns and will return.

And that makes our, our constant anticipation, one of joyful, active, servant hearted, uh, properly perceived.

I'm going to do what God has given before me.

Uh, God has given what God has set before me.

That's, that's, that's the kind of acting we'll do as the church.

And we trust that Jesus will, will, uh, do what he says on that last day.

Jessica: Awesome.

It's time for the Jessica jar.

Peter: What part of this sermon might be confusing?

Jessica: I don't know.

I can't think of what would be very confusing.

I, I really like that it cleared up confusion, talking about the different responses to waiting.

And then I think you can peg yourself into one of those and like, Oh, which one am I doing?

Or which one am I doing today?

Right.

David: That's a helpful thing about classification is it does, it offers you different options that ask you to look at your life situation from different perspectives.

That's nice.

Peter: Yeah.

It doesn't necessarily have to be one or the other.

David: Right.

Peter: You know, there's times where we are faithful in our anticipation and there's times where we're kind of desperate or tempted to act in desperate ways.

And there's times where we're tempted to be resigned.

And so maybe it's not a matter of one or the other, as much as acknowledging the experience of, of the Christian life.

Jessica:

Sure.

I could always have had more examples of how to be faithful in the anticipation part.

You know, like I can't really go to all nations, like you had cited that the disciples did in their anticipation, but what could I be doing?

It's still exciting because something is going to happen.

Right.

And so you're not just waiting forever, but you know that it's coming and it will come either when he comes or when I die.

Right.

One way or the other, then I'll get to see Jesus.

And that is exciting.

And you pointing that out is a nice reminder of where we are.

That's great.

Remind us of what's coming.

Thank you guys.

That's all for today.

Hey listeners.

Today's episode made me think of a resource.

We got a grant, so it's free.

I'm not selling anything.

It's all downloadable.

It is a four-part video-based curriculum that enables churches to start reaching out to the immigrants in their community.

We found a local immigrant ministry that's thriving.

And so all the videos are interviews with the actual volunteers and the founders of this ministry.

So it's very down-to-earth, practical details, a lot of stories about the people that they've met.

There's a discussion guide with questions and processing activities.

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The way that God is working in this community to reach people of all nations.

It's befriendingneighbors.concordiotheology.org.

Check it out.

I'm your host and producer, Jessica Bordeleau.

Join us next week here at Lectionary Kick-start, when Dr. David Schmitt and Dr. Peter Nafzger will spark your thoughts for next Sunday.

It's like all the questions in the Jessica jar were actually in Jessica's mind.