

Ascension of the Lord (Year B)

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*Luke 24:44-53*

*Then he said to them, 'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.' Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.'*

*Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.*

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The Ascension of the Lord is a wondrous, if slightly perplexing, liturgical celebration. It always appears forty days after Easter and ten days before Pentecost. Technically, the Ascension of the Lord was celebrated last Thursday but, as is very common for many churches, we are celebrating it on the Sunday immediately following it.

I like to think of the Ascension as another example of a transitional event meant to take us from one place to another. We can think about it like the end of the first portion of a two-part television episode where something dramatic has happened and then the screen goes black and the words “to be continued...” appear leaving us wanting for more.

Go back with me, for a minute, to the story of the Transfiguration of the Lord. That story is always celebrated on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday and serves as a transitional story that maneuvers us from the season of Epiphany to the season of Lent. Likewise, the Ascension of the Lord begins the transition from the season of Easter to the season of Pentecost.

Jesus has been resurrected for forty days now. He has spent time with his disciples and those who followed him, who are undoubtedly seeing and hearing him with a renewed sense of wonder, awe, and perhaps a healthy dose of curiosity and anticipation for what is to come and what “it” all means. Jesus has been crucified and buried and rose again from the grave but the cycle is not over. There is still ground to be covered in this cosmic drama of salvation. Although the disciples probably would have loved for Jesus to stick around, Jesus knew that there were still more chapters in this narrative to be revealed.

In a few minutes, we will recite (as we do most weeks) the words of the Apostles' Creed. Last fall, several of us gathered and spent several weeks in an in-depth study of this ancient statement of belief. One of the things we learned together was the sense of visual movement that takes place through the narrative of the Apostles' Creed. We begin “up there” by saying “I believe in God, the Father, Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and in Jesus Christ, his son, our Lord.” We then begin to follow Jesus on his journey downward: “who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under

Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried.” We then arrive at the bottom of the wave: “he descended into hell.”

But then, Easter morning came and we celebrated the reversal of the direction. Now we begin our journey with Jesus upward: “on the third day he rose from the grave.” Today, after forty days of celebrating the Resurrection, we embody Jesus’ completion of his upward movement to return full-circle to his heavenly status: “he ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty..”

*That* is what we are celebrating today. We are celebrating that the bodily resurrected Jesus is now fully triumphant and has returned to his place in the heavenly Trinity.

But, in my mind at least, that leaves a burning question for us. Did Jesus really “leave us”?

Well, both yes and no.

Jesus did really leave. He was with his disciples in a very tangible, physical, bodily form and is no longer walking among us in this world in that literal sense of the word. Now, as you might have learned by now, I do not like to waste much time in sermons trying to scientifically explain a story that was never intended to be explained scientifically. Suffice it to say, “he ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God, the Father, almighty..”

Yet, in another very real sense, Jesus really didn’t leave. You see, though he did ascend into the heavens, his body is right here in this very room. The Body of Christ is sitting in these pews, singing in the choir, doing children’s church next door in the fellowship hall, driving around outside, working at the IGA or on the ferries. We, you and I, are the physical presence of the Body of Christ here in this world ever since the Ascension.

The Ascension, soon to be coupled with our celebration of Pentecost next week, serves in a way as our ordination and installation into the work that God is calling the Church to do. It’s almost as if the story of the Gospel to this point has been the disciples doing their thing with Jesus with their training wheels on. On the day of the Ascension, Jesus gets out his toolbox, reaches for the philip’s head screwdriver, and begins to take them off. Now, riding a bike alone without training wheels for the first time can be rather scary. Just like, I imagine, seeing Jesus do everything that he did and then all the sudden have that same Jesus say, “OK, I’m gonna go hang out with the Father, it’s YOUR turn now!”

It’s scary, let’s be real. Being the Body of Christ is a BIG job with a lot of responsibility. And we would do well to never take that commission lightly. We, being the fragile, broken people that we are, have reason to doubt our ability to live up to that divine expectation.

But take heart. There are two significant parts to today’s text that should leave us encouraged as we watch the Risen Lord continue to rise before our eyes in the distance.

First of all, it is important to take note of what Jesus is doing as he departs. I invite you to take a moment and look at the piece of art on the front of your bulletin. One of the reasons I like this piece of art over others that depict the same story is that other paintings depict Jesus calmly and quietly ascending into heaven sometimes looking upward or off in the distance. *This* painting, however, shows Jesus looking down *at* the disciples with his arms outstretched in an act of blessing. If you look closely enough, you can even see that Jesus’ mouth is open, suggesting that he is speaking even as he is being lifted.

This, in my opinion, is very accurate to the text. If you look closely at today's passage, it does not say that Jesus blessed them, finished his blessing, and then left. The text actually says that Jesus continued to bless the disciples as he departed. This suggests to us that Jesus' blessing at the Ascension was not a one-time-only deal. Jesus' blessing is a never-ending stream that follows us as we go out to do the work he has trained us to do.

Secondly, even though Jesus has ascended, we are *far* from alone! You see, Jesus promises us the presence of the Holy Spirit. We are not left to be the Body of Christ without guidance, without leadership! No, we have been promised the presence of the very Spirit that sustained and guiding Jesus through his work here on this earth. We are promised the same Spirit that will come to us next week as this sanctuary is filled with the color red and we celebrate the birthday of the Church, also known as Pentecost.

So, yes, Jesus has ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. And while that might sound like a really nice finale, it's actually quite the opposite - it's only the beginning of the story. There is much left to be told and much work to be done. And next week's Pentecost service will yet again ordain us for what lies ahead.

And so, I will end this sermon like today's text leaves us...

Stay tuned! To be continued...

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.