

“Glory and Giving: That We May Be One”

Acts 1/ John 17:1-11
Ascension Sunday/ Easter 7A

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From the Pulpit

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Pray for Illumination: Open our hearts and minds
O God, by the power of your Holy Spirit, that as
the scriptures are read and your word proclaimed
we may hear with Joy what you have for us this day.
Amen.

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There are certain great festival days that Christian churches celebrate each year. One of them is Christmas, when God in Christ enters our world to live among us. Another, Good Friday, when God in Christ reveals how much he loves us by dying for us. The third, Easter Sunday, when God shows his creative power by raising Jesus to new life.

As the Easter season comes to a close, it's time for us to transition from reflecting on Jesus' visitations with his disciples to the ongoing ministry of Christ's church in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Fourth celebration is Ascension Day, the season after Easter culminates in Ascension. The Feast of Ascension is slightly sidelined by the world today. It was this past Thursday, you may have missed it because it was probably drowned out by Eat More Fruits and

Vegetables Day, Red Nose Day, Strawberries and Cream Day, End of the World Day or my favorite, National Memo Day. My apologies about not getting a memo out to you sooner.

Ascension celebrates Christ clothed in glory and the challenge that faces us as we are clothed with the Holy Spirit. Christ's ascension to heaven is essential to our understanding of the Christian faith.

St. Augustine expressed his opinion of Ascension Day like this, "This is the festival that confirms all of the great festivals together. For unless the savior ascended into heaven his Nativity would have come to nothing and his passion would have born no fruit for us. And his most holy resurrection would have been useless."

The Incarnation of Jesus brings heaven to earth, when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

The Ascension brings earth to heaven, now that the one who ministered to us on earth is now in heaven with God. We have an advocate with God, and a giver of gifts.

Jesus was lifted up from the ground and a great cloud surrounded him and he was gone from the disciples sight.

It's strange---Jesus' disappearing act. For days after Easter, Jesus kept appearing and disappearing and reappearing. I can imagine that Jesus' refusal to remain dead, while glorious, was also a little exhausting for the disciples. Maybe a few were relieved when Jesus ascended, because they desperately needed a nap?

I love the post from the late Rachel Held Evans, a young mother, author and lectionary blogger taken too soon from this world. She wrote this about Ascension, "Jesus, what's up with this floating thing?"

After all the eating and drinking and healing and laughing and crying, it just doesn't seem like your style—floating. I like you better with your feet on the ground.”¹

Maybe we want him to keep his feet on the ground, too.

But that can't be the way this story goes. In order for God's work to come to fruition in the world, Jesus has to exit this earthly stage. With a shepherd's crook or a trap door, or a kind of Peter Pan exit (with harness and pulley) that leaves the others standing on stage in amazement...Jesus has to leave the stage. Jesus has to leave in order for the ongoing ministry of the disciples and centuries later, the church, to continue.

For some, it might seem like Jesus left too soon. The disciples weren't ready yet. Leaving before they were trained and educated and well rehearsed. You know, well trained disciples going out to witness in the land and making disciples of all nations, certainly would be more effective than mere novices.

But Jesus insists on using people before they think they are ready--Before we think we are ready.

Not to worry. Jesus left instructions. It would be like Jesus to leave instructions, wouldn't it? He left assignments. Marching orders. Jesus' instructions weren't long, but they were comprehensive. In the Gospel of Matthew, he told the disciples, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...” In the Acts of the Apostles that Kevin Jones read a few moments ago, Jesus' words were no less expansive. “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and

Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” All nations, everyone, no one is left out, everyone invited. ALL!

Through the Ascension, we see Jesus as equal with God, seated at the right hand bearing authority over the whole world. And so we joyfully proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord, Ruler of everything in our lives. In this, we celebrate the Lordship of Christ. Reformer John Calvin insisted that Jesus’ Ascension was “not to leave believers without help, but to rule the world with a power even more present than before.”²

We like the disciples, we too must pray that we may be filled with the Holy Spirit.

We look up, we look down upon his world, sweeping our gaze left and right---shaping ourselves for Christian discipleship. We see the challenges of our community and of this world.

We pray for his gift to us, that we may grow in joyful and obedient service. We are called to serve and called to witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ.

We are to redirect our gaze to the challenges ahead of us. For all it’s strangeness, the story has significance for our continuing journey as disciples. It speaks to our situations of journey, of loss and transition in these uncertain times when we may fear for the future.

We may not be able to see Christ with our own eyes, but his presence is still with us. At the moment when it seems like life has caved in around us, when we are separated from family and loved ones, from our church, and when things are not familiar. The PRESENCE OF JESUS is never far away.

When it seems that all there is in the future is filled with gloom and hopelessness and death and our anxiety gets the better of us, Jesus reminds us, “I am with you always.”

We are caught up in the resurrection life. We are a resurrection people. We believe that despite all the trials and pains of this life, that Christ sits at the right hand of God, guiding his church and us, his people.

As we await God’s kingdom to come as Christ returns, we have been given the task to carry on Christ’s ministry. We pray these words each week, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN.” As we wait we are called to trust in the Lord, remembering that he has all power and authority. And he has promised his continual presence.

It is a challenge, but we remember the first disciples who were transformed by the life-given spirit in him. That is why we are able to put our trust in the One who is Lord of all.

We celebrate the Ascension again and again because we are no different from the early church who gathered around this story from the beginning to hear what they needed. That they would receive power from the Holy Spirit which God was sending them in order for them to go out into the world. And perhaps even today we are reminded that we have no power of our own and never have.

There the disciples were, a fragile little community, anxious and bewildered, watching their Lord leave them, but they aren’t distraught and sad. When it’s all over, the disciples return to Jerusalem, not sad and alone...but worshipping with great joy.³

Because disciples continued the ministry that Jesus began, we too, can join in the ministry and mission right here on the corner of Cleveland and Broad, in this place and in this city, at this time for the work God is calling us to do. We continue God's mission that is set before us, constantly praying and discerning what God has in store for us, and who God is calling us to be.

Our faith continues to grow because we nurture it. We cultivate our life of faith in our study of scripture, in prayer, and meditation, stewardship and service. We learn from one another, work for justice in our community and show mercy to those in need. We are transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit, and we are open to the word of God and the work of Jesus in our lives to mold us for new life.

With Pentecost on the horizon, our focus begins to look forward into the future, where God's realm will come into its fullness. This is where the birth of the church and the power of the Spirit make us one in Christ. As we are with Christ and Christ is ascended with God, we all are one.

Let us therefore commit ourselves, to live as people not limited not to live in fear, but transformed by our Christ, Who is risen, ascended and glorified. Amen.

¹ www.rachelheldevans.com/blog

² John Calvin, Institutes, II, p253

³ www.Day1.org Rev. Katherine Taylor, Blacksburg, VA FPC