

Acts 1:1-11  
Psalm 47  
Ephesians 1:15-23  
Luke 24:44-53

Before we begin this morning talking about the nature of Jesus and his ongoing presence with us, it seems appropriate for us to pause for a moment to remember the 19 lives lost to a lone gunman in Rob Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas this past week. Our grief is not only for those who died, but also for the ones they leave behind and for the ones who will be next. We are the only country in the world that experiences such carnage within its own borders and at the hands of people who reside here. There are no easy answers, but we must find a way out of this recurring nightmare. Good Lord, deliver us.

Turning our attention now to Jesus, we know a number of things about the nature, personality and spirit of Jesus of Nazareth. We've learned these things through passages of Scripture in the New Testament that describe his words and his actions; we learn about him in the passages of the Old Testament in which the promises of a Messiah and what he will be like are described to us and to the Jewish people. We've also learned about the nature, the personality and the spirit of Jesus by our own experiences with him and by the experiences that others have had with him and then described to us. Jesus is not an unknown person, but he is easily misunderstood and sometimes conscripted for personal gain by some who say they believe in him....but actually do not.

Periodically throughout the calendar year we designate certain dates and Sundays to mark particular aspects of Jesus' life that help us understand him a little better....Christmas, Easter, Epiphany, Pentecost, etc. Today we are observing Ascension Day. In the Christian calendar it falls every year exactly 40 days after Easter and always falls on a Thursday...never on a Sunday. That leaves us to decide which years we will pause to remember Jesus' having been taken up into heaven and what that means to us. We pause at this moment to focus on the fact that Jesus' ascension was not something that *he* did...but something that was done *to* him. He was ascended into heaven...drawn up into heaven...taken up into a cloud. It's very much like his resurrection. He didn't bring himself back to life. He *was* resurrected from the dead. These events which mark him as singularly unique in the known annals of human beings reveal to us the power of Almighty God and the nature and the necessity of the life and ministry of Jesus. So every few years we skip over celebrating the last Sunday of Easter and turn our attention to the equally stunning description of his return to heaven through God's almighty hand.

Jesus entered the world at God's behest as the power of God held within a human body. He came into the world in the form of an infant, grew through childhood to adulthood and actually

revealed the nature of God to those around him for only three short years during his earthly ministry. He came to save us from ourselves. He came to level the playing field. He came that we might have true life. And he came to us so that he might be able to reveal the nature and power of God to us. When his earthly ministry was over, culminating in his crucifixion and resurrection, he returned to his heavenly father by way of the ascension that we recognize today. He did not give birth to himself. He did not initiate his own growth through childhood. He did not chart out his own three year ministry that began when he was filled with the Holy Spirit at his baptism. He did not crucify himself and he did not resurrect himself. And he did not ascend himself into heaven. These were all things that were done *to* him and to which he gave his permission. The agency for all these occurrences in Jesus' life lay not solely with him, but with God to whom he gave his own agency. Jesus followed instructions right down to the smallest letter. He did not balk. He did not run away. He did not argue. He did request on the night before his crucifixion that he might be spared, but ultimately he left all the agency for his life in God's hands. In that respect, he was not his 'own' man. He was God's man. In fact, we have come to believe that he was God himself residing in a human body and yet he speaks to God and about God as though they were in relationship with one another as separate entities and indeed they were...and are. Stop and think for a minute how willing any of us might be to turn our own agency completely over to God? That's a sobering thought. We would probably have completely different lives than the ones we have now...for surely if we relinquished all our own agency to God, God would put us to work at things we've probably never even dreamed of. In all likelihood, God would have us working toward the building of the kingdom of God right here on earth...and that would be some very difficult work indeed!

During Jesus' earthly ministry as he moved around the geographic area we know as Israel, he revealed the nature and power of God to as many people as he could. He fed 5000 people with 2 loaves of bread and 5 fishes. He turned water into wine at a wedding. He restored sight to the blind. He restored life to a little girl who had died and to the slave of a Roman soldier. He empowered the cripple to walk. And he upheld the shunned and outcast. He verbally jousting with the religious leaders of his day as they had managed to convolute the teachings of God and the rules God had set forth. Jesus did things that no other person had ever done before or has done since. However, he *did* reveal the power of God who was the source of Jesus' power and agency. And what did we learn about God from Jesus?

We learned that God loves everyone...even the ones who don't always behave as they should. We learned that God can physically heal broken bodies. We learned that God was willing to do anything at all as a human being in order to draw us closer to the source of all life...God. We learned that God would never desert us. Jesus promised to be with his disciples always even as he was going back to his Father in heaven. Jesus promised to return to earth and to bring the kingdom of heaven with him when he came. It seems only logical that he can't return to earth

*with* the kingdom of heaven unless he leaves the earth and returns himself unto the kingdom of heaven.

He promised never to leave us and yet he is not walking the earth now...as far as we know. We still need his earthly presence desperately, so what did he mean when he promised never to leave those on earth who love him? Even as he was ascending back into heaven, he told his followers to stay together in Jerusalem and wait for the coming of power from God before they began to share with others all they had learned from and about him. He told them to stay connected to one another. He told them to go into the world and tell everyone who would listen all the things they had learned about the nature of God through Jesus.

Jesus may not be walking the earth now...as far as we know...but Jesus is still with us as he promised he would be. Anyone who believes in Jesus and talks to Jesus regularly has also felt the presence of Jesus and knows that he is with us still. He has not abandoned us and neither has God.

As we are confronted on a regular basis with the presence of evil in the world, we need to hold fast to the promises of Jesus even as he ascended into heaven. He has not forgotten us. He has not abandoned us. And neither has God. Continue to pray. Continue to listen for the stirrings of Jesus and God and the Holy Spirit within you. They are there. Even as we are reeling with the evil we see around us...and sometimes the evil that touches our own lives...we know that Jesus is still with us.

It's quite likely that each one of us here this morning is still reeling from the unthinkable tragedy in Texas that ended in the death of two adults and nineteen children in what should have been an unquestionable space of safety for all of them. Our hearts break with each one of these occurrences and our emotions explode with outrage at the profound evil that ended these lives. We feel angry and helpless, but we must not give up trying to devise a solution. Granted, 'thoughts and prayers' are not enough, but they are the place to start. The Lord God and Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit hear our outrage and our cries for solutions. Even though it sometimes seems pointless, continue to pray. God hears those prayers and God will not abandon his children to evil. God never has. God will find a way for us and will show it to us so that we may restore safety and sanity to our lives.

On the observation of this Ascension Day, remember that Jesus shared his own agency with God and the Holy Spirit and we can, too. Jesus promised to be with us always and he is. Continue to respond to him in your heart and in your thoughts and in your actions. Jesus will lead the way out for us.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.