

Easter 7A, The Sunday after the Ascension
Acts 1:6-14
May 28, 2017
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Why the Ascension?

This past Thursday was Ascension Day, the day when we recognize that the Resurrected Jesus ascended into heaven. We hear about the Ascension in the gospels of Luke and John and in the books of Ephesians and 1 Timothy, as well as in today's reading from Acts.

So what are we to understand of the Ascension? The Scripture doesn't tell us the specifics of *how* the Ascension happened, for the Bible isn't that kind of how-to guide. Instead, what we can discover are some insights into the *why* — why is Jesus' ascension important? Why does it matter?

Acts provides us with that familiar, yet puzzling imagery of Jesus being lifted up, a cloud somehow taking him out of sight, and the disciples are amazed. That physical presence of Jesus, the incarnate, resurrected Word made Flesh, has been taken into a different sort of existence, lifted up into the full presence of God. Why does this matter? Because in Jesus' ascension, Christ makes a path for us. We too are linked to the abundantly loving, eternal presence of the Divine. In Christ's ascension we get a glimpse of the promise that we too, one day, will be invited to walk that path that Jesus has already taken, to follow him to where we, in our own lowly human-ness, will be wholly accepted, wholly enveloped by the fully divine presence of God. This is the good news of God's great love for God's creation: the gift of eternal life.

And yet, while we can live in that hope and rejoice in that truth, we can't only focus on the future and what is to come. We live in the reality of the present and it can be hard to figure out how to live our lives in Christ, while trying to madly keep up with the pressures of our day-to-day lives.

After the Ascension, the disciples had the same problem. After seeing Jesus lifted up, they didn't know what to do. They simply stood there, looking up at the sky until two strangers appeared, dressed all in white, and told them to stop. Don't just stand there looking up towards heaven, do something!

These unnamed strangers shake the disciples from their reverie, reminding them that it's not the time to linger, to wait, but instead to its time to be fully present — calling them back to focus on what Jesus has taught them and shown them, for the disciples have been called to be witnesses, spreading the good news about Jesus. And they will, as Jesus promised, receive the power of the Holy Spirit.

Why is the Ascension important? Because it's Christ's glorification — his death, resurrection and return to the Almighty — that allows the Holy Spirit to come. The disciples don't know exactly when this will happen, or what it would look like or feel like when the Spirit arrives. They have to wait in faith for what Jesus had promised and trust that they will be guided. And that's something they do in community, joining together as brothers and sisters in prayer within the upper room, praying for discernment and guidance on how they can continue Christ's work in the world.

Although we won't celebrate this gift of the Holy Spirit until next week on the Feast of the Pentecost, we know the truth of the power of the Spirit who moves and breathes, inspires and guides us, in our own daily lives. And most of us recognize that there are those times, when we too, like the disciples, don't really know what to do next, when we must wait in faith for God's guidance, for the Spirit's nudging, in our own lives. But that is our life of faith, that constant movement and tension, as we wait for the Spirit to help us discern God's call for us – both as individuals and as the Church.

How are we called to witness, to proclaim the Good News of Christ in word and deed? How do we demonstrate that the outcasts are truly welcome, that Christ calls us to care for the poor, the sick, the hungry, and those in need, for all God's beloved children...even those we may fear, or those don't like. How do we become Christ's hands and feet on this earth?

I'd like to share just a few things that have occurred this past week here at Holy Spirit, as we strive together in community, to do God's work in the world:

- We've supported our initial group of three families, as part of Family Promise. These strangers, these homeless families were welcomed to live here and eat here and join us in fellowship, as they strive to get back on their feet. So many hands helped — to setup and cleanup, to bring food and share time together, as well as provide security and support as overnight hosts. And if you couldn't be involved this time, there will be other opportunities to help in the future, as we expect to be involved in this work at least 4 times each year.
- We also had COHI, our Community of Hope group, finalize preparations to begin a new chaplaincy ministry with Forsyth County DFACS workers this upcoming week, by providing support to those who work to help struggling families in our local community.
- And we had another group of faithful parishioners supporting the Pantry this week, helping to distribute non-food items.
- And we joined together in Bible study, exploring, discussing, and discerning how the Scripture applies to our lives today. And we came together in worship and prayer, praying for healing for the sick, for those in need, and for the world.

These are just some of many ways to engage in carrying Christ's light and love.

Why does the Ascension matter? The Ascension creates that path for us to eternal life. The Ascension transforms the story of Jesus from that of a rebellious leader with a small, unconventional group of followers in an ancient time and place, into a unifying worldwide mission of witness to the Good News of God in Christ. The Ascension leads to the gift of the Holy Spirit, strengthening and empowering God's people yesterday, today, and into the future to seek to serve Christ in all persons, respecting the dignity of every human being, and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

I'd like to share with you one final story written by the Rev. George Macleod, a 20th century Church of Scotland minister.

There is a very old legend and all legends that persist speak truth. It concerns the return of our Lord Jesus to heaven after his Ascension. It is said that the angel Gabriel met him at the gates of the city.

"Lord, this is a great salvation that you have brought," said the angel.

But the Lord Jesus only said, "Yes."

"What plans have you made for carrying on this work? How are all to know what you have done?" asked Gabriel.

"I left Peter and James and Martha and Mary to tell their friends and their friends to tell their friends until all the world should know."

"But, Lord," said Gabriel, "suppose Peter is too busy with his nets or Martha with her housework or the friends they tell are too occupied and forget to tell their friends — what then?"

The Lord Jesus did not answer at once, but then he said in his quiet, wonderful voice, "I have not made any other plans. I am counting on them."

Our Lord Jesus Christ has not made any other plans, but is counting on us, too. How are we called to carry the Good News of Christ into the world?