

Acts 1: 6-11 "Rebirth Creation" Rev. Janet Chapman 5/12/24

In honor of Mother's Day, a story is told of a little boy who had been watching his mother's stomach increase in size. It was becoming harder and harder to sit on her lap. "Mommy," he said, "Why is your stomach getting so big?" He was told that his little sister was inside her stomach. Puzzled, he continued. "Mommy, why is my little sister inside your stomach?" Not deterred, the mother explained that once he was inside her stomach as well. When the boy's father got home, the boy asked his father if he could talk to him in private. The father thought that since the next day was Mother's Day, the boy wanted to know what they were doing. Instead, he asked, "Daddy, I need some answers. First, why does Mommy keep eating little kids and second, how did I escape?"

Our national calendar tells us that today is indeed Mother's Day, but in the church calendar, it is also Ascension Day, the Sunday preceding Pentecost. It's hard to muster too much excitement about Ascension Day after the past couple months where we had the intensity of Lent and then the exuberance of Easter, celebrating the power of resurrection. Next Sunday is Pentecost, the celebration of the birth of the universal church, where the Holy Spirit is sent to guide a small group of followers into becoming Christ's church. Some of us might even wear red to symbolize the flames of the Holy Spirit which descended on all those present the day the Spirit made its presence known. But today never makes the Top 5 most memorable days in the church year. Most folks have never even heard of it and if they have, they quickly dismiss it. Maybe that is because other times in the church year like Christmas and Easter, Pentecost and Ash Wednesday, as well as other biblical stories all have a human dimension to them. Jesus' birth, his bar mitzvah, his friendships, his miracles, his tears, even his death and resurrection have the feel of real human experience about them. As Barbara Brown Taylor states, we know something about these things. We have tasted them in our flesh and blood. It is not until Christ leads his followers to Mount Olivet and floats out of their sight, that we become like the boy of the kid-eating mom without any reference to comprehend what's happening. Nothing remotely like this has ever happened to most of us, no one travels into the clouds, no one else goes to sit at the right hand of God. Where did he go? How and why did he go? With such questions floating around in our minds, and no

reasonable answers being given, we push it aside and this is where some of us completely lose track of Christ, literally and figuratively. The story of Christ's ascension is a story about Christ alone, and that can make it slippery to handle. Like the disciples, our only part in this drama is to stand on the ground with our mouths hanging open, wondering what in the world to make of it all.

Many churches with stained glass windows have chosen this story to be among the windows that grace their building. Such a full-length window was part of my office at the Selma church because it used to be connected to the sanctuary in the early 1900's and it was the primary south window. In the summer, the heat radiated through that stained glass depiction of Christ hovering in the air and if you weren't careful, it could burn your skin. It was a metaphor to me of how untouchable this story can seem in our modern times. Christ's mysterious and miraculous departure from this earth to reign with God seems more confusing than the way he arrived in the first place, so we are stuck staring at the sky. Two beings in white robes are sent to the disciples that day asking a rather odd question, "People of Galilee, why do you stand gazing at the sky?" The question isn't unlike the same one asked when the women come to the tomb searching for Jesus' body and two beings ask, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" And in our mind, we respond, "Isn't it obvious? The dead tend to stay dead and what goes up must come down... it's the laws of physics."

A side note here that some of us might stumble over that whole up-and-down view of the universe at this point. That is because we make a lot of fuss here in our church about God being here with us and not out there far away, distant somewhere. But the reality is that the word "up" only becomes problematic if you are a literalist. In the symbolic language of faith, "up" is as good a direction for God as any. In other circumstances, it might have been to the side or even down because God is in all directions, but according to this story, up is where he went. One scholar encourages us to remember how wonderful it was, when we were just three feet tall, to be lifted up over the heads of grown-ups so we could see better – that is the kind of "up" Luke is referring to here.

It is strange that Luke is the primary author we have for this story. Matthew doesn't mention it at all and Mark is vague at best saying, "So then the Lord Jesus, after he had

spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God.” John suggests it happened Easter Day as Jesus speaks to Mary of Magdala outside of the tomb, “Go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” Then instead of ascending right away, he goes to cook breakfast on the beach for his friends and John’s Gospel ends with no further details about all the things Jesus did. In a closer look at Luke’s Gospel, the final verses tell us of Jesus leaving his friends and being taken up to heaven. Then Luke starts off Volume 2, which we call the Acts of the Apostles, giving more details of the same event. It makes sense since this story is both the last chapter of Jesus’ life on earth and the first chapter of the church’s story. What doesn’t make sense is that Luke cannot seem to decide exactly how it happened. The first time he tells it, it happens on Easter evening in Bethany but the second time he tells it, it happens 40 days later on Mount Olivet. Maybe he heard it both ways and didn’t want to choose. Maybe the story evolves as people repeated it, depending on whether they saw it as the end of Jesus’ ministry or the beginning of their own. In either case, symbolically speaking, Christ ascended in order to finish what he had begun with us. It wasn’t enough that through him, God was born into the body of the world – that was just his Christmas gift to us. His Ascension gift was that through him, the body of the world was borne back to God. Christ restored the goodness of creation by presenting his own broken, ruined flesh and blood to be seated at the right hand of God. He rebirthed creation so that never again shall we doubt its inherent sacred nature. By taking on the elements of flesh and blood, Jesus not only brought God to us, he also brought us back to God. Calvin Miller expands on this by saying, “We are ever being born, or dying, and the thrill of choosing is always ours. Only once must we be born without our own consent. Only once must we die without our own permission.” In other words, we are always choosing to be born, to live, or to die. Because of Christ’s ascending to God’s right hand, we can be assured of our inner goodness and every day of our lives will come with opportunities for you and I to be reborn back to God.

This day is all about Christ getting out of the way in order to set us on our way, to put us on the path of rebirth and abundant life. Brown Taylor notes that once Christ arrived in heaven, he turned on the faucets of the Holy Spirit and drenched his confused friends, who

then became his body on earth. They probably would have preferred to hog-tie Jesus rather than let him out of their sight. But that is not how it happened. He went away and they got on with the business of being the church. The Lord was not anywhere anymore because he had become everywhere instead. It was almost as if he didn't ascend as much as he exploded, so that all the holiness once concentrated in him alone flew everywhere, so that the seeds of heaven were sown in all the fields of the earth. Thus, when the disciples are confronted with the fact that they are stuck staring at the sky, and they really aren't doing much good that way, they reconsider their stance. They look down at each other instead, and what do you think they saw? Peter saw his brother Andrew, James saw his brother John, Thomas the Twin saw Simon the Zealot, and so on. They all saw each other, and with nothing but a promise and a prayer, those folks consented to become the church... and nothing was ever the same again.

People of Redding, people of California, people of America, why do you gaze at the sky (except to maybe get a rare glimpse of the Northern Lights)? Why cast your eyes away when the body in question has just floated out of sight? Maybe we need another window, a more modern one, to describe our own situation now: A window with just us in it – no angels, no Jesus, no heavenly light – just us watching the sky, with faces turned up like empty cups that only one Presence can fill. Then when asked why we watch the sky, we can reconsider our stance ... and bring our eyes down face to face with one another. Who will you see? Take a moment to look around right now at the faces around you. Who gazes back at you on this good and sacred earth? Who is being reborn before your very eyes? Who is letting die the darkness of sin? With the power of a promise and a prayer at hand, let us get back to the business at hand and consent to be the church... and nothing will ever be the same again.