

Luke 24:45-51, Ephesians 1:20-23 “God’s Chosen Instrument” Rev. Janet Chapman

Not many folks can say they have worked in an office with a 10 foot stained glass window. I admit it has given me a certain fascination with stained and colored glass, a fascination which has prompted me to take a glass blowing class on the Oregon coast and spend hours on sabbatical in those infamous Murano glass shops. The window at my former church was a depiction of Jesus ascending into heaven and so every day, I was confronted with today’s Gospel story in artistic glass expression. Today’s story is one of those strange ones that I’m guessing Steven Spielberg would have loved to direct, filled with special effects of shadow and light. He would set the scene high on a rugged mountain, with a vivid blue Mediterranean sky in the background, the musical score somewhat Middle Eastern and mysterious, swelling to crescendo as Jesus slowly levitates like a giant helium balloon being filled up on the eve of the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day parade. All eyes follow him up, up, up and away into the heavens.

Now this image proves problematic for those of us who question that heaven is literally “up there.” We still use that language but metaphorically, sometimes. A story is told of Christine and Sam who were helping out in their church’s sanctuary to fix some old wiring in the attic. Christine sat at the altar near where the problem existed in the ceiling so she could communicate with Sam once he reached that spot. She was greatly concerned for his safety as he had to maneuver thru the attic over several rafters spaced wide apart. Our own Chris A knows something about that as you have to lay down and basically slither from one rafter to the next, not letting your feet touch the ceiling tiles. Anyway, another couple entered the church and saw Christine sitting at the front of the sanctuary, head bowed, listening for sounds from above. Thinking she was deep in prayer, they tiptoed to the kitchen but jumped when they heard her yell, “Sam, are you up there? Did you make it ok?” The couple shrieked when they heard the response, “Yes, I made it up here just fine.”

“Up there” doesn’t have the same meaning as it did for people in Jesus’ day. In those days, it was believed that the world was a flattened dome structure. Just above

earth, were the heavens, and below was hell – a 3-tiered universe. Science and space exploration have shown it isn't as simple as that. If pressed, most of us would speak of heaven as a whole other dimension, not confined by time or space. We may perceive heaven as that event in which God's will is finally and fully done. It is where and when God exists in fullness and we find our completeness, finally realizing our destiny as God's beloved children. For some, it is that moment where creation finally recognizes that God reigns supreme above all else. Until then, we have the stories of faith inspired by God which have a truth to them that can't necessarily be explained scientifically or historically. Yet they are truths that provide meaning for our lives.

Today's story is Luke's account of Jesus' final interaction with his disciples; it is an invitation to envision what is next, for the present and future? Whereas Easter's resurrection gets tons of attention, the Day of Ascension is often glossed over. But without the ascension, the resurrection would have been incomplete. Both are highly significant as Christ's transformation from bodily form to spiritual gives a glimpse of what is to come after our death; it is a promise of life eternal and portrays something never seen before. It is a story of how the disciples carry on from this point. Any of us who have lost a parental figure, an inspirational mentor, a supportive and wise friend can surely relate to how scary it must have been for the disciples. What do you do when the most influential person in your life moves on? How do you find the courage to move ahead, to carry their legacy on? Preacher Mike Watson reminded me of a wonderful illustration that came out of Tim Burton's strange but prophetic movie from years ago called *Big Fish*. The story follows Will Bloom as he cares for his dying dad, Edward. Edward is known for his stories. In fact, it's about all he does at his age, tells stories of his life. Will has become estranged from his father simply because he can't relate to him anymore, feeling frustrated by the lack of details and half-truths in his stories. Now, his father is dying and Will seems lost in trying to explain the legacy of his father, and what that means for his own life. As Edward is on his deathbed, he turns to Will and asks him to tell the story of how he dies. Will becomes anxious and is about to call the nurse to take over, when he realizes this is the end, and what his

father really needs is a conclusion to his story. So he begins to finish his father's story for him, telling him about how he dies, and the beauty that surrounds the celebration of his life, as all his friends are there to see him go. As Will is telling the story, you witness a transformation, where Will recognizes that the specifics of the story aren't nearly as important as the meaning. Will begins to understand that his father had told stories not because he was trying to hide details or make himself look more important than he was, but because his father knew that stories had greater meaning and depth than all the details. He understood then that the proper response to the death of his father was to continue the story, to express how much his father loved other people and how they loved him in response. At the very end of the movie, a few years later, Will's own son is heard telling some of the stories that were originally told by his grandfather. Will understood then the value of how to tell stories that express meaning, depth, and love, a very sacred and God-inspired understanding indeed.

As Jesus is getting ready to leave his disciples, the text says he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, to understand the meaning, depth, and love present in all those God-stories. Then he says, "You are witnesses of these things," which is another way of saying, "You are the storytellers from here on out." You are the ones to share what you have seen, what you have experienced, what you hope for, what you live for and what you die for. You are the ones to carry on the legacy, speaking not just to the disciples but to all followers of Christ to come. With the ascension, Christ transitions from being limited by time and space to being present in all time and space to equip the storytellers, you and I. Christ is no longer bound by earthly limitations as Paul tries to explain in Ephesians 1, but Christ is one with all things, and all things are one with Christ. It is the foundation upon which the body of Christ, the universal church, can finally be born. Remember that Jesus was not the only person the disciples had ever seen risen from the dead. Emptying graves was a hallmark of Jesus' ministry, a miracle they had witnessed over and over in his three years of work. Although those resurrected didn't have glorified bodies like Jesus, they still stood on the ground and walked among the people. But as Gregory Smith notes,

the ascension of Christ was a far greater journey than just emerging from six feet under. It was a journey to crown Christ as the ruler of all creation and the church as Christ's body, not as 2 entities but as one, to be God's chosen instrument for the reconciliation of the world. The church shall be a colony of heaven on earth, Paul says, the divine gene pool from which the world shall be recreated in God's image. God isn't done with creation until heaven and earth are reunited as one. Most importantly, it is from the heart of Christ's now ascended body that the transforming love and power of God shall flow. Think of it like a 4-tiered fountain, if you will, in which God's glory spills over into Christ, and Christ's glory pours into the church, and the church's glory drenches the whole universe. That is what Paul can see, as clear as day, when he writes to the church at Ephesus – he sees the perfection of creation through the work of the church, all because of Christ's ascension.

But Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us that the church of the 21st century falls somewhat short of Paul's vision. The next generation walks right past our doors without even looking in. If they are searching at all, they are searching for more than we are offering. They are looking for a colony of heaven, and they aren't finding it. So we are challenged to reflect that trickle down glory from God in every encounter we have, practicing that unconditional and limitless love Jesus modelled as he walked the earth. From the brain-damaged poverty-stricken young man who shows up wanting to belong, to the family who has been torn apart by life-long addictions, to the couple who simply wants to live out the love God planted no matter their sexual orientation, to the older woman with recurrent cancer who has been told she has only 6 months to live, we are called to be the Body of Christ, to be heaven on earth. Clothed with power from on high, we are called not just to hear the word of the Lord, but to understand it by putting it into action. There is no better way to come to an understanding than to live it; there is no better way to be witnesses than to share it. May the power of God trickle down upon us as we tell about and live that life-transforming love of God's through all the sacred stories we share. Amen.