

Ascension Sunday

May 16, 2021

“Don’t Just Stand There!”

Psalm 47 ~ Acts 1:1-11 ~ Luke 24:44-53

There’s a strange painting of the Ascension in the Metropolitan Museum collection in New York. I’ve seen classic studies of the subject by other Renaissance artists like Tintoretto and della Robbia. They all show Jesus levitating slightly above the disciples ... displaying the wounds in his hands and feet ... Christ crucified ... risen ... now glorified. Art was a visual sermon back in the days before most people could read or write, let alone afford their own copy of the scripture. But the German artist von Kulmbach took the Bible literally. He painted the disciples standing in a knot gazing at the sky with their mouths open. Above them at the very top of the painting is a cloud ... sticking out of the cloud ... a drape of red robe ... sticking out of the robe ... just two bare feet! It looks like Jesus might be wiggling his toes. It is the moment just before the angels tap them on the shoulder. If anyone would like to see it, I have a copy in my office.

Acts...Chapter 1...Verse 11. That’s where I want to concentrate today as we remember Christ’s ascension. Verse 11 reads: “Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” It’s a good question ...but isn’t that what we come to church to do?

Some churches don’t pause to remember the Ascension of Christ. Maybe we’re in a rush to get to Pentecost. Or maybe we don’t remember the Ascension because we sense what the German biblical scholar, Rudolf Bultmann, had the audacity to say out loud half a century ago: “This story is clearly a myth, y’all!” (Well, he said it in German, of course, which made it sound much more intelligent.) But this story obviously comes from a pre-scientific time when heaven was up, and hell was down because everyone thought that the earth was as flat as a plate and the center of the universe. So, when it was time for Jesus to go to heaven, he went up into a cloud ... because heaven and God and the angels were all up there. It made perfect sense in the first century, but not in the space age.

But this biblical message is hardly designed to prove historically what has occurred; the real subject is transformation and empowerment for ministry, not some vapid argument about so-called "facts."

So how does this story of the Ascension of Jesus into heaven make sense for our day? Once we let go of the question of what really happened ... and ask what does this story really mean? ... two more important questions arise. If Jesus was raised from the dead and came back from the tomb, why did he leave again? And, where did Jesus go? Where is Jesus now?

The first question is not so hard to answer. Why did Jesus leave? When I was a child, I was a klutz. (Some things you never grow out of!) It took me quite a while to learn to ride a bicycle. Oh, I had training wheels. I rode on those until all my friends were riding circles around me and asking, “How long, Mary Anne?” My dad came to my rescue. First, he took off the training wheels. Then for a little while each day, he ran along beside me and held the back of the bike to steady me. He kept me from tipping over just like the training wheels did ... only better because he was right there beside me to steady me. But do you know when I actually learned to ride the bike? When he let go. That’s also how I learned to make my own decisions. As long as others were there, doing it all for me, I didn’t need to grow up. But when they let go ... when they made me do it on my own ... I grew up. (Mostly.)

Why did Jesus leave? As long as he was physically here, the disciples had no reason to grow up and do anything on their own. Jesus could do it all for them: feed the hungry ... heal the sick ... help the poor ... love the wayward ... care for the dying. Now, with Jesus beyond their sight, that good work fell to his followers to do. He told them as much in those forty days between the resurrection and the ascension. Their mission, he told them, was to finish his mission. The gospels and Acts emphasize how he kept telling them that throughout the forty days just before he disappeared from their sight.

What’s more, as long as Jesus was contained in a single body, he was limited to one small area, for one short time. Now ... with the body of Jesus gone and the Spirit of Jesus entering the bodies of all those who believed in him ... he could be everywhere, all at once, down through all time. Don’t you see? It was necessary for the body of Christ to disappear so that the church might become “the body of Christ” ... his hands and heart ... his mouth and feet ... his life and love ... finishing his work in the world.

That also answers the second question: where did Jesus go? He is here. He is you. He is me. He is us, the church. That’s what the angels told the disciples when they were staring slack jawed at Jesus’ wiggling toes disappearing into the cloud.

Worship *is* a transforming experience, an encounter with the risen Christ. But it is not the sole goal of spiritual life. Too many churches forget that. Too many Christians forget that. Too many pastors forget that. They act as if coming to church were the main thing ... as if this were where God's main work gets done.

Imagine you have a garden. In that garden you are going to grow juicy tomatoes, crisp cucumbers, sweet zucchini, spicy peppers ... with a row of bright sunflowers just for decoration. You gather some workers. You meet at your garden shed. You show them the tools ... tiller, hoe, rake, shovel. You hold classes on how to use them. You have your workers study the seeds so they will know which ones to use where and how to plant them. You talk

about weeds and have serious discussions which ones are weeds and which ones actually help the soil. Every once in a while, you have a guest gardener come to enthuse them even more about tilling the soil and planting the seeds.

All through the growing season you gather once a week in the shed to go over these things. And you enjoy your meetings so much that you put in a kitchen and start sharing meals there. You even put up a big sign by the shed, "The Gardeners Guild ... New Members Welcome." But when you go outside, you just can't understand why there are no juicy tomatoes, no crisp cucumbers, no sweet zucchini, not a single hot pepper, not one bright sunflower to decorate your day. Why? Because folks, you can't grow a garden sitting in the shed.

We have work to do. We have a commission to fulfill. From now on, we are the body of Christ ... we must proclaim the good news ... we must drive out the demons that hold people in their addicting clutches ... we must embrace all people with the merciful love of God. We ourselves now stand as an answer to the question, just where did Jesus go? If Christ is risen ... if Jesus is alive ... if he loves all people ... it will be because we rise ... because we are alive ... because we love all people in his name. If the world is going to meet Jesus at all now, they will have to meet Jesus in us.

Whatever actually happened on that hillside years ago, it must have been frightening to the disciples. How could they keep going? No wonder they were paralyzed ... frozen in place ... staring up at the sky wondering what to do next. No wonder they needed a couple of angels to tap them on the shoulder and say, "Don't just stand there! Get to work, like he told you!" And that's what we're supposed to do even though Jesus isn't physically with us and we feel so inept and alone and frightened at times. We want to come to church and stand around and hope God will do everything for us. We want to stand still and look up at the sky in the hopes that deliverance will come. But God sends a messenger to say: "Don't just stand there! Get busy! Be about the mission he gave you. Go and tell. Go and care. Go and love. And – you are not alone."

The Rev. Barrie Bates tells the story of an Englishman who was taken to a nursery school by his mother when he was a boy. Like every toddler, he was anxious about being abandoned. But his mother leaned over, kissed him and said, "Goodbye, my love. No one is leaving." Every day she bid him farewell with these words. "Goodbye my love. No one is leaving." He was too young to understand the paradox, but he was comforted by her reassurance, so he soon adjusted to his new surroundings and faced the frightening unknowns with good courage. He grew up to be a successful adult, but years later he was faced with the hard task of placing his mother in a nursing home. She was elderly and frail and suffering with Alzheimer's Disease. She hardly recognized him, forgot to eat or take medications, and could not take care of herself. The day he moved her from her home of many years to new and frightening surroundings, he

remembered another day years before. He leaned down and kissed his mother and said, “Goodbye, my love; no one is leaving” ... words she recognized even if she could no longer recognize him. Tears formed in her eyes and she squeezed his hand as she repeated his reassurance herself: “Goodbye my love, no one is leaving.”

When Jesus left us, he told us he would send his Spirit. He told us he would go to prepare a place. He told us to finish his work. He told us he would come back. At the same time, he told us he would be with us to the ends of the earth ... to the end of the age. Goodbye, my love. No one is leaving. He is gone. He is with us. We can't just stand here. We've got to get busy!

May we pray?

On this day when we remember how you left us, be with us, Lord. Stay close and help us to obey your words, to get busy, to do your work, to feed the hungry, to heal the sick, to care for the dying, to love one another, and to spread the good news of your love for all people everywhere you send us. Send us out today to be witnesses of these things. Then bring us back to celebrate again, how you have gone ahead to prepare a place for us, how you are with us in all that we do in your great and gracious name. Amen.