

ASCENSION OF OUR LORD | MAY 24, 2020

ACTS 1:1-11 | PSALM 47 | EPHESIANS 1:15-23 | LUKE 24:44-53

I mentioned a couple of weeks ago that one of the strange downstream effects of this pandemic was making us reconsider language that we often take for granted. Words like “essential” and “normal” that we threw around without a second thought back in those idyllic days of February now seem impossibly fraught with meaning.

Another concept we’ve had to reconsider is distance. Sometimes this plays out in rather absurd ways. Grocery shopping has the feel of playing Tetris, trying to rearrange our carts to maximize the space between us. And sometimes it feels tragic. I had a conversation recently with one of our neighbors whose partner lives in an assisted-living home. Visits that used to be daily are now impossible. We are learning how to make masks and wash our hands, but mostly we are learning how to remain socially close while being physically distant.

The story of the ascension is really a story about distance, about being together and being apart. And to understand how that’s true, it helps to think about the way the day’s readings are set up. If you got confused during today’s gospel reading and thought maybe you weren’t paying attention, that’s a good sign you actually were paying attention. Because we hear the story of the ascension told not once, but twice. Once from the very end of St. Luke’s gospel, the other from the very beginning of Luke’s Acts of the Apostles. In Luke’s writings, they overlap.

The obvious question for us to ask is *Why?* If you start volume two of a story, you wouldn’t start by retelling the thing that happened at the end of volume one. You could never get that past an editor. So why does Luke? For Luke, it’s a matter of perspective. It’s the same story from two different angles, each one revealing something different.

In Luke’s gospel, the ascension is an ending story. For forty days, the risen Jesus has been present with the disciples. He’s been “appearing to them” and “speaking about the kingdom of God.” He’s been showing them “convincing proofs” of his resurrection. Jesus has been here. You can point to him. You can touch him. You can have dinner with him. You can see him. You can get his attention whenever you have a problem or you need him to fix something. This is the way we like Jesus. If you have a question, go ask Jesus. He’s right over there. If you’re unsure about the resurrection, go have a meal with him. Maybe he’ll let you touch his wounds.

But now Jesus says that he has to leave. Jesus is not going to be around in quite the same way that he was. He’s not going to be on call to solve our problems or there to reassure us that we’re on the right track. In other words, Jesus is no longer just another object in the world. A piece of the furniture that we can pick up and move around with us wherever we go.

And that makes us anxious. Jesus is going to be, well, gone. It’s not a coincidence that when we experience some bad thing in our lives, our first reaction is often to say, “Where was God?” Not why did God do this? Or who is God? But *where* is God? Why isn’t God *present*? The artwork in this week’s bulletin seems to capture that moment from the disciples’ perspective vividly. Jesus presented just as a pair of feet at the top of the frame. You can imagine Jesus saying, “Good luck! Remember the Beatitudes!”

But in the book of Acts, the story of the early church, the ascension is a beginning story. Back in the 1950s there was a very influential commentary written on the Book of Acts that argued that the book of Acts was about what life was like when Jesus was gone. But that’s not quite true. When you read Acts, you see Jesus’s presence all over. Jesus is still very much alive and working in the lives of this community.

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When you read the story of the ascension from that angle, it takes on a very different meaning. If the gospel's ascension story is about Jesus's departure, the Acts story is about Jesus's continuing presence through the power of the Holy Spirit. Because what the disciples discover in the book of Acts is not that Jesus is gone, it's that Jesus continues to be present, albeit in unexpected ways. When you read the book of Acts, what you find is not a Jesus-nostalgia club trying to get back to the glory days. What you find is a God who keeps injecting mercy and compassion into history. What you find is a mission that crosses the old borders we had constructed. And perhaps most importantly, what you find is a group of people whose source, whose energy, whose life is rooted in the risen Christ.

But this is a lot less comforting to us than the flesh and blood Jesus that we can see, touch, and maybe even manage. It's not a coincidence that the disciples' respond to Jesus's departure by staring up into the heavens and waiting for him to come back. As if to say, "Yea, the Holy Spirit thing sounds great, but we'll just wait for you."

Jesus promises to be present. Jesus doesn't promise that the solutions will be clear and the answers self-evident. Jesus doesn't promise that it'll be easy and we won't mess up sometimes. Jesus only promises that he will be present. That because Jesus has ascended to the one he calls the Father, that Jesus is the one who, as St. Paul puts it, fills all in all, there is no situation that we enter into before God.

That should change how we think about our community and our purpose. Because it means that there is no situation, no problem, no issue that we can't be a part of. That in a world where God feels absent, we can make things on earth a little more like they are in heaven.

Last fall, we had a speaker here from Christian Health Care Center to do a presentation on preventing domestic violence. Two people came to the event. And a couple of days later I was talking to someone about the event, and I was sort of wondering what I could have done better with promoting it and getting the word out. And they said, "You know. That's just not really church stuff."

Jesus's promise to be present in every nook and cranny of human existence, to be "all in all" as St. Paul puts it, means that there is no situation that we can look at and think, "This is not really church stuff." In fact, most of the best work the church is doing in the world today is with stuff that many people don't really consider "church stuff." When Jesus sends us into the world, he doesn't send us into the world that we'd like to think exists. He sends us into the world as it actually is.

Being faithful doesn't mean being perfect. It doesn't mean being efficient. It doesn't mean being pure. It means being present. Go after the hardest questions. Go after the things that people would rather pretend don't happen in their household or neighborhood. Go to the places where it seems like Christ is absent. Because that's where Christ is present.

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