**7 Easter**

**The Sunday after the Ascension**

**June 1, 2014**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,**

**The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,**

**And the power of God known in the Spirit.**

**Amen.**

Today is the Sunday after the Ascension. According to the Book of the Acts of the Apostles Jesus was “lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.” The wonderful graphic on the cover of the insert shows the disciples all looking up at the feet of Jesus as he goes to heaven to sit at the right hand of God. This is one piece of high Christology … Jesus was born of a virgin … impregnated by the Holy Spirit. He lived his life among humans as a divine being. He was crucified, resurrected by the power of God, and then ascended to heaven. Jesus came from God and he returned to God.

This is one of those bible stories about Jesus that I have a hard time wrapping my head around … at least as a literal fact of history and as a doctrine of the Church. However, after almost 40 years in the pulpit I believe I’ve come to understand that accepting the literal words of the text … whether it be the Bible, or the Prayer Book, or books of theology … is not the only way to a deep faith.

Before I went to seminary I taught mathematics at the University of South Carolina and the University of Tennessee – Chattanooga, so I was accustomed to standing in front of a group of people and speaking. However, in seminary the students participated in the daily worship and the first time I was vested for the role I was … surprisingly to me … rather nervous. As I stood at the chancel steps to read from the Prayer Book I realized that my knees were shaking under my cassock. As I read the prayer I was wondering if my classmates could see my robes twitching or hear my voice cracking. Then I had this thought … all while I am reading a prayer out loud to the congregation of students and faculty … then I had this thought: “Stop thinking about your knees and think about what you are reading!” I always thought it odd that my mind could be doing one task, and another part of my mind could be thinking about how nervous I was, and yet another part of my mind was scolding me.

So, last week, as I was reading the Eucharistic Prayer at the altar, I had a thought. I saw something in the prayer that I had never seen in that way before, and my mind started to play with the words … all while I am praying the consecration for the bread and wine of our communion. My spiritual advisor … if I had one … would have chastised me. Yet, I wonder … maybe that is exactly what is supposed to happen. We can look at the words of the Eucharistic Prayer as meaning literally and exactly what they say … they are reporting fact and history and the doctrine of the Church. Or we can look at those words … and the words of any prayer for that matter … as an entrance into a holy moment and a sacred space. Perhaps my mind was supposed to wander.

Now, don’t get me wrong. If you are praying the Lord’s Prayer and your mind is wandering off to the grocery shopping you have to do after church, I’m not sure you are moving towards a sacred moment … no matter how heavenly your dinner will be. However, most of you come to worship with us on Sunday mornings with a desire to experience something holy. If you didn’t you would have made another choice of how to use your time. And, in that context, I believe anything that opens us to that holiness is fair game.

I remember years ago preaching a sermon about forgiveness and reconciliation. I will confess that I don’t think it was a very good sermon. But after church a parishioner said that the sermon had prompted an amazing experience. Earlier that morning she had a passionate argument with her sister. It was about a betrayal that had happened years before. She said, “When you started talking about forgiveness and reconciliation it touched something in my heart and soul. I don’t really remember what you said … I wasn’t really listening. But my heart is now changed, and I know what I have to do to forgive my sister. Thank you.” I know I personally didn’t have anything to do with it. She entered that holy experience by the power of the Holy Spirit. Yet it would not have happened had it not been Sunday morning, in church, in the context of holy time and sacred space.

Last week I quoted Fredrick Buechner from his book, Whistling in the Dark: A Doubter's Dictionary. This is another quote from Buechner … this is from *The Return of Ansel Gibbs,* a novel Buechner wrote while he was still in seminary.

*If you tell me Christian commitment is a kind of thing that has happened to you once and for all like some kind of spiritual plastic surgery, I say you’re either pulling the wool over your own eyes or trying to pull it over mine. Every morning you should wake up in your bed and ask yourself: “Can I believe it all again today?” No, better still, don’t ask it till after you’ve read The New York Times, till after you’ve studied that daily record of the world’s brokenness and corruption, which should always stand side by side with your Bible. Then ask yourself if you can believe in the Gospel of Jesus Christ again for that particular day. If your answer’s always Yes, then you probably don’t know what believing means. At least five times out of ten the answer should be No because the No is as important as the Yes, maybe more so. The No is what proves you’re human in case you should ever doubt it. And then if some morning the answer happens to be really Yes, it should be a Yes that’s choked with confession and tears and...great laughter.*

The thought I had last week was this: What we are doing is not about an intellectual assent to the words of a text … whether it be our Bible, or the Prayer Book, Eucharistic Prayer, or some grand tome of theology. It is not about a literal agreement that the facts and history are absolutely correct. It is not about a once-and-for-all … one-time-only deal. The story of Jesus living and dying and being raised again, and lifted up to heaven at the Ascension is not the point of the story. For the story to be “true,” we must not stand outside the story and look in at it … and even intellectually accept the veracity of the story … but rather we must enter into the story and make it our own.

Over a decade ago, while still the rector of St. Mark’s in Toledo, Ohio, I got a call from the Bishop of the Diocese of East Carolina. A parish in a coastal North Carolina town was in need of some very special care after an extreme trauma, and because of my background in conflict resolution he wondered if I might be interested in interviewing with the Vestry. I knew the town and the parish well … perhaps too well. My family had vacationed there since I was five years old. I know many of the clergy who have served in the parish. And perhaps most significantly, this is the church at which I conducted my father’s funeral, and my father’s ashes were buried in the garden right outside the parish house doors. With my mother living just a few miles away in the next town this was a very attractive offer, yet I was wary.

When I arrived for the interview the psychic environment felt conflicted: one side of the room felt hostile, while the other felt welcoming. Then the first question was asked and I knew my instincts were correct: “Do you believe in the literal Virgin Birth?” Sadly, this interview wasn’t about seeking a pastor to heal the deep wounds that had injured the community. Rather, it was about being right and wrong; about being “in” and being “out;” about orthodoxy and heresy. After the interview I withdrew my name from consideration. On the surface it was an extremely attractive possibility, yet deep in my heart and soul I also knew that I was too close to the situation, and that I would be seen as cause for further division, not the healer I feel called to be in my ministry.

I tell you this because I believe we are often blinded by the statements of our faith identities and we fail to seek God’s grace, love and mercy beyond the words that try to define us. It is not a matter of whether or not Jesus was literally born of a virgin, or ascended into heaven (wherever that is), but it does matter that we come from God, that we are created in God’s image, and God wants us to be in God’s holy presence. Our hope as children of God is not in getting it “right.” Our hope lies in grace, love and mercy of God. Our hope is not in an orthodox faith that can pass some litmus test. Our hope is in a God who is God, however our limited minds understand God to be God. Our hope is in God who does what God does. Our hope is in God who loves all that is made; who sees the sinner far off and rushes to greet them; who takes the side of the poor and marginalized; who heals those who are outcasts; who welcomes all to the table.

I believe that in Jesus we have seen God. The gospels tell us of the life, teaching, healing, and ministry of Jesus. Early Christianity searched for an identity in a world already populated by Judaism, Greek philosophy, Roman imperialism, and Eastern mysticism. Yet we don’t have to look for the living God in the dead shards of history. Some may find reason to divide the church along the lines of ancient concepts and details. But, for me, what really matters is God’s ongoing life, illumined for us in Jesus of Nazareth. It is about our citizenship in a Godly realm where love conquers hate, joy conquers despair, goodness conquers evil, and hope appears on even the harshest of days. It is about being distracted from the words of the text into a sacred space and a holy moment.

As an Easter people, we believe that the risen Christ comes through those doors into our sacred space and calls us outside into lives marked by peace, servanthood, and hope. How will that happen? How will we see enough to find that kind of faith? I believe that our primary work as people of faith is to know one another, to listen to the world around us, to hear questions that stir our imaginations, and in those questions to witness the presence of God. Rather than squandering more time arguing about answers, we need to imagine the questions.

Rather than looking up at the feet of Jesus at the Ascension as depicted in the graphic on the cover of the bulletin, let us begin to look around at each other … then we will know that we are in the presence of God.

Sometimes I am distracted even as I pray out loud. I don’t think I am alone, and sometimes I think it is the Holy Spirit leading me … and possibly you … to a new way of seeing things … a new understanding … a place and time that is holy and sacred. Sometimes it is just a distraction, but I think it is worthwhile keeping my mind, my heart, and my soul open to all possibilities.

In closing, I believe I would be remiss if I did not include another voice about living our faith … a quote from a true prophet who died this week, Maya Angelou:

*I'm working at trying to be a Christian, and that's serious business. It's like trying to be a good Jew, a good Muslim, a good Buddhist, a good Shintoist, a good Zoroastrian, a good friend, a good lover, a good mother, a good buddy - it's serious business.*

I encourage you to welcome those holy distractions … they just might lead you into the presence of God.

Amen.