

7 Easter
The Sunday after the Ascension
May 28, 2017

**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 worship booklet 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 put in the category of “just because it didn’t happen doesn’t mean it isn’t true.” My scientific 21st Century mind has a hard time believing that this story is literal fact, yet I think I understand what the story is trying to tell us. After over 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.

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 sacred 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.

This Sunday is kind of in-between-time ... in-between Jesus ascending to heaven and leaving the disciples to fend for themselves ... and the coming of the Holy Spirit next Sunday on the Day of Pentecost. Although it may feel like an empty time ... a time of not knowing what is coming next ... I believe it is seminal time. It is like the time between planting the seed and finally seeing the sprout emerge from the soil. Looking at the garden after planting the seeds it may seem that nothing is happening, but obviously new life is forming in the fertile earth in this seemingly empty space. And empty time is often scary ... a time of not knowing what comes next ... a time of not sure of what to do or how to do it or even what the future holds. But ... in its own way ... it is sacred time ... liminal time ... a time when life and faith can change.

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 is 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.

For me, what I believe we are doing when we gather as this community of faith is **NOT** about an intellectual assent to the words of a text ... whether it be our Bible, or the creeds of Eucharistic prayer from our Prayer Book, or some grand tome of theology. It is **NOT** about agreeing with the stories of our Holy Scriptures as literal facts and history. It is **NOT** about a once-and-for-all ... one-time-only intellectual decision regarding one's faith commitment. The story of Jesus living and dying and being raised again, and lifted up to heaven at the Ascension is not the ultimate point of the story. For the story to be "true," we must not stand outside the story and look in at it ... we don't even have to intellectually accept the veracity of the story ... but rather we must enter **INTO** the story and make it **OUR OWN**.

Imagine those people who were what we now call disciples ... the men but also the women. They encounter a man named Jesus who had a peculiar way of understanding the holy and making it a way that brought a fullness of life that they had never known before. In him they saw the divine presence of God, and Jesus invited them to live the same kind of life ... he called it living in the Kingdom of God. But part of living this kind of life meant speaking the truth at all time ... and it included speaking truth to power. In his case that meant Jesus speaking truth to the power of the Roman occupying government, and truth to the power of the priestly hierarchy in the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. But this truth ... the truth about how to live life as if God were alive in one's self ... was more important than life itself. The powers that Jesus spoke truth to did what all powers do in those situations ... they killed the messenger ... they killed Jesus.

The disciples ... the men and women who had committed their lives to following Jesus and following in the way of Jesus ... seeking what Jesus called the Kingdom of God ... the disciples were stunned by his death. And they were even more stunned when they realized Jesus was still alive when they gathered together ... when they broke bread and drank wine and shared it

with each other ... and when they did they recalled what he had told them about remembering him ... and he was alive in their midst.

Then he ascended into heaven. They felt unsure about what to do next. They were afraid in this liminal space ... this in-between time. That is when they stood outside the story and looked carefully ... the story wasn't just about a man named Jesus ... it was about them if they would make the story their own. And that is what happened for them at Pentecost. They began living the life that Jesus had led ... as best they could ... and began inviting others to do so as well ... and the Christian Church as we know it came into being.

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 ... the Kingdom of God ... 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, justice, servanthood, and hope. How will that happen? How will we see enough to find that kind of commitment? 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.

The story of Jesus living and dying and being raised again, and lifted up to heaven at the Ascension is not the ultimate point of the story. For the story to be "true," we must not stand outside the story and look in at it ... we don't even have to intellectually accept the veracity of the story ... but rather we must enter into the story and make it our own. 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, listen to the world around us, to hear questions that stir our imaginations ... then we will know that we are in the presence of God.

Amen.