

**7 Easter**  
**The Sunday after the Ascension**  
**May 13, 2018**

**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.**

Happy Mothers' Day. This is a special day set aside to honor our mothers ... and traditionally we do so in person, or we give a call ... maybe even Skype. And we send cards or flowers, take our mothers out to brunch or dinner. For some of us, our mothers have passed away, so we recall the memories ... and it gives us an opportunity for reflection.

Now, I think it is safe to say that most of us have committed faux pas in our life that seem to scar us forever. You know, those things we said or did that were embarrassing and we wish we could have a do-over. Well, one of my Mothers' Day sermons was like that, and I've been tentative about preaching about Mothers' Day ever since. You see, I once preached a Mothers' Day sermon about how Mothers' Day was really an invention of greeting card companies, the flower industry, and restaurant owners. It was one of those faux pas that is engraved in my mind ... and it was in front of a very full congregation. The point I was trying to make is you shouldn't just take the cheap out and honor your mother one day a year on Mothers' Day, but you should honor your mother every day of the year.

However, the day I preached that sermon Dorothy Ebert ... God bless her soul ... was sitting right in front of the pulpit, with her daughter, and son-in-law, and grandchildren in tow to take her out to a Mothers' Day brunch following church. And Dorothy was wearing a big corsage and holding Mothers' Day cards from her daughter and grandchildren. The image of her sitting there is like a digital photo stuck in my mind's archive ... and I can't get it out of my head. You see, Dorothy was obviously highly invested in Mother's Day, and she was not pleased with the opening of my sermon with its cynical thoughts about the invention of Mothers' Day. Her scowl let me know her displeasure as I preached ... her words after the service were even more stinging.

So, HAPPY MOTHERS DAY! And to play it safe I think I will preach about Jesus, the Ascension, liminal time, and us.

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 what is called 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 Jesus returned to God.

My scientific 21<sup>st</sup> 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.

This Sunday is kind of in-between-time ... in-between Jesus ascending to heaven and leaving the disciples to fend for themselves on the one hand ... and the coming of the Holy Spirit next Sunday on the Day of Pentecost on the other. 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.

For me, what I believe we are doing when we gather as this community of faith is not about an intellectual agreement to the words of a text ... whether it be our Bible, or the creeds, or the Eucharistic prayer from our Prayer Book, or some grand tome of theology. For me, it is not about agreeing with the stories of our Holy Scriptures are literal facts and history. For me, It is not about a once-and-for-all ... one-time-only intellectual decision regarding one's faith commitment. For me, 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 I believe we must enter into the story and make it our own.

I believe that all of us know something about liminal time ... that time between knowing something intellectually, and entering into it experientially. Liminal is that threshold when something becomes real in a way we never could have imagined. For a mother on Mother's Day, it is that time between knowing you are pregnant ... and then experiencing the life of your newborn baby on your belly right after he or she has come out of your womb. It is the threshold time between deciding to go to college ... and attending your first class. It is the time between having a biopsy for cancer ... and getting the results. It is the time between realizing that your marriage cannot last ... and the day the divorce is final. And, in all those cases it is the time between what just happened ... and what will happen next. Often liminal time is exciting with lots of possibilities. But it is also a time that can be frightening as one crosses the threshold from the known and familiar into uncharted territory ... the uncharted territory of the world, your relationships, and even your own psyche.

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 understanding the holy and sacred, and making it a way that brought a fullness to their lives like 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 times ... and it included speaking truth to power. In his case that meant Jesus speaking truth to the power of the Roman occupying government, and speaking 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 that happened they recalled what he had told them about remembering him ... and he was alive in their midst.

Then Jesus left them alone ... 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, God's love, and God's 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 the God that was alive in Jesus is alive in each of us. 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 is not in passing some litmus test of orthodoxy. Our hope lies in the grace, love and mercy of God. 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. 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 then 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 ... 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.

Yes, this Sunday is Mothers Day ... Happy Mothers Day! It is also the Sunday between the known and familiar, and uncharted territory. It is liminal time ... just like the liminal time we all experience at moments in our lives. The story of the Ascension is not something to stand outside of and wonder. It is a story to be entered into. It may be scary ... but can be a threshold time full of wonderful possibilities.

Amen.