

7 Easter
Sunday after the Ascension
May 16, 2021

**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 7th Sunday of our Easter season in the Church's liturgical calendar. It is also the Sunday after the Ascension ... the ascension of Jesus into Heaven. Jesus came from God ... Jesus returned to God. Jesus was born of a virgin by the Holy Spirit and announced by an angel from heaven. Jesus lived and died on this earth. After he died he was placed in a tomb hewn out of rock. But the tomb could not hold him. Jesus was resurrected to new life and appeared to the disciples on this earth. Then he ascended into Heaven to return to God. That is the story we hear in Luke's Gospel and the Book of the Acts of the Apostles this morning.

I was Rector of St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Toledo, Ohio for fifteen years. During that time, I officiated at a lot of funerals, and I visited many of the cemeteries in the area ... historic cemeteries with monument size headstones, cemeteries along streams with majestic trees, country cemeteries next to corn fields, and new cemeteries where no headstones were allowed, only in ground markers so that the lawn mowing would be more efficient. One of those no-headstone cemeteries was on a five-acre plot of land surrounded by suburban homes, and it was right across I-75 from a large shopping mall. It had been established by a local funeral home in the 1950s when I-75 was built ... easy access for funeral processions.

As the owners of the funeral home were retiring, they sold the cemetery to corporation which operates lots of cemeteries across the country. Believe it or not, this is quite common these days. Anyhow, the corporation then built a mausoleum in the cemetery. The mausoleum was about 30 feet tall and had several hundred crypts to hold the caskets of the deceased.

I actually did several "burials" in the mausoleum, but it seems that it was not a popular option. One day, when we were driving to the mall, I looked over at the mausoleum and there was a large banner hanging across it ... CLEARANCE SALE.

That is a true story! I mention this because it is the custom for many people today ... at least for those who are nominally Christian in this country ... to be buried in a casket that is placed in a concrete box or crypt. One can upgrade the casket so that it is airtight, and the concrete box can be upgraded so it is watertight. The actual reason cemeteries require a concrete box is so the backhoes that dig the graves can drive over other graves without them caving in ... I know, but that is another story.

In the time of Jesus, a deceased person's body was prepared for burial by women. The body was carefully washed and anointed with aromatic oils, then wrapped in a shroud before final placement. That is still the custom today in many Jewish communities. Today, the casket is plain wood, placed directly in the ground with no concrete box to protect it, and then the mourners shovel dirt into the grave.

An interesting custom is that when a mourner is finished shoveling he ... and except in rare exception this is reserved for men ... he puts the shovel back in the pile of dirt rather than hand it to the next person to shovel. This is because one does not pass one's grief onto another.

Anyhow, the gospels tell us that Jesus died on the cross on a Friday. According to all four of the gospels, Jesus was taken down from the cross and given to Joseph of Arimathea who placed his body in a tomb carved out of rock. However, since this was late in the day, as the sun was setting, which marked the beginning of the Sabbath, the normal preparation for burial of the body of Jesus did not happen. That is why when the Sabbath was over ... on Sunday morning ... it was the women who went to the tomb. The women went to the tomb to complete the process of preparing the body of Jesus. However, they found the tomb empty.

Interestingly, this is where the story Gospel of Mark ends ... with the empty tomb. However, the gospels of Matthew, Luke and John all have stories of the resurrected Jesus appearing to the disciples, yet none of the stories is exactly like any of the other stories, and some of the stories are vastly different. Finally, Luke has the story of the Ascension ... the story of Jesus ascending into heaven. But the story of the Ascension does not appear in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, or John.

Actually, Luke has two stories of the Ascension ... and we heard both of them today. The author of Luke's Gospel is also the author of the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. The Gospel of Luke with in the 24th Chapter. In Chapter 24 of Luke's Gospel the women go to the tomb on Easter morning and encounter two men in dazzling clothes. They say to the women, "Why are you looking for the living among the dead? He is risen." The women tell the disciples, yet no one has seen the risen Jesus at this point. Then Luke tells the Road to Emmaus story. On that same day, two travelers ... most likely a man and a woman ... encounter a stranger along the road who interprets the scriptures for them. The three of them stop to eat, and when they break bread couple realize the stranger is the risen Jesus ... but then he disappears.

Finally, the author of Luke's Gospel says that the couple went back to Jerusalem, met with the disciples to tell them their story, and Jesus appeared again. This is the story we just heard from Luke's Gospel this morning. Remember, all this happened on Easter Sunday. The Gospel of Luke ends with Jesus and the disciples going to Bethany and Jesus "was carried up to heaven." That is the first account of the Ascension.

However, the Book of the Acts of the Apostles ... also written by the author of Luke's Gospel ... opens with, "After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days ... " We also heard this read this morning. So the question

is, was the Ascension on Easter Day, or was the Ascension forty days later? Or, does it make any difference?

For those who want or need to literalist ... or fundamentalist ... YES, it does matter. However, Luke was writing to Jews in the First Century. He was telling them about something that seemed outside of time and space and literal interpretation. He was limited by language, but he wasn't going to let that limitation keep him from spreading the word.

In ancient cosmology there was this realm around us where life happens ... the earth. Then there was the world above this earth where the gods resided ... above earth, and the sun, and the moon and the stars. This realm was called heaven. And then there was the underworld which was dark and damp and foreboding.

That was it. If Jesus came from God, then he came with the angels, and he came down from heaven. After he died, Jesus was laid in a dark and damp tomb carved out of the rock of the earth ... in the underworld. But the tomb could not hold him. He came back to life ... but not this life ... a new life ... a new life called resurrected life. Finally, Jesus went back to where he came from ... to God ... to God who lived in heaven. If you want or need to be literal then so be it, but the story I just told you is not literal, it is a way to tell a bigger story.

I tell you all this because I believe we are often blinded by the statements of our faith identities ... an arrogance of our interpretation of these scriptures. In so doing, 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, 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 the mercy of God. Our hope is not in a literal or fundamentalist interpretation of 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 recognizes everyone as a beloved child of God ... 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.

The disciples, who had focused the God-experience in Jesus, found in his death that this God-experience was no longer confined to Jesus. The presence of the holy that they had found in Jesus they now discovered in themselves. It was as if they saw that what it was that they had met in Jesus had now taken up residence in their lives and hearts and spirits. Their charge ... as is our today ... is to take seriously all that Jesus took seriously ... to live their lives ... and for us to live our lives ...with the presence of the holy alive in them just as Jesus had lived his life with the presence of the holy in his.

The caskets and concrete boxes and mausoleums that are used to house our bodies when we are dead are symbols of the way we often live our lives. We want to protect our bodies ... and our psyches ... from being exposed to the elements around us. And, we want to make sure that our bodies ... and psyches ... do not find a way out of those enclosures.

Jesus rising from the grave easily becomes a miracle that we can worship. However ... at least for me ... it is much, much more than that. Death could not hold Jesus, and therefore death lost its power and its sting. When we can live with the holy presence of God in our lives the way that Jesus did in his, we are beyond death ... we are beyond death to all those elements of our lives that hold power over us.

Did the Ascension ever happen the way that Luke describes it? I don't know, but I don't think that is the point. The point for me is that it is not a matter of whether or not Jesus literally ascended into heaven. 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 the grace, love and the mercy of God. Our hope is not in a literal or fundamentalist interpretation, or 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 recognized everyone as a beloved child of God ... who takes the side of the poor and marginalized ... who heals those who are outcasts ... who welcomes all to the table.

I'll end with a short story ... Last year Caren and I planted some milkweed hoping to have some Monarch butterflies in our garden. The milkweed didn't do so well, and we basically forgot about it. Well, it survived our mild winter and came back this spring, and a few Monarch butterflies did come and fly in our garden. And they laid some tiny eggs on the milkweed. And those tiny eggs turned into tiny caterpillars. Then those tiny caterpillars ate the leaves of the milkweed and grew to the size of fat pencils. Then they turned into cocoons, and this week we looked at a cocoon and could see the colors of a butterfly wing through its thin skin. As we watched the cocoon opened and a Monarch butterfly unfolded, it dried its wings, and it flew off.

Now, I've been in biology class and learned all about eggs, and caterpillars turning into butterflies, but watching it happen in real time is something else ... it was a miracle. If God can

make that happen, then God can make anything happen. Did the Ascension ever happen the way that Luke tells the story. In all my arrogance from years of education and Bible study I want to say "I doubt it." However, when confronted with the miracle of a beautiful butterfly all I can say is, "If God wanted to make it happen, I'm sure God could have made it happen."

Amen.