

**Ascension Sunday
May 21, 2023**

**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.**

Sermon by Rev. Renee LiaBraaten

I have a couple questions to get us started, and I can't wait to hear your answers.

1. When you were a child, what was one of your favorite fairy tales?
2. What are some things you learned from fairy tales?

Last December, just before Christmas, I was driving to the library with our little 5-year-old grandson, Jonah. Many of you met Jonah, when he and our daughter, Linzee, worshipped with us at St. Cyprian's this past March. Back in December, Jonah had just starting learning how to sound out words. So, as we were driving, he was trying to read the signs. We were waiting at a traffic light and Jonah was struggling to sound out the words that were written on a Christmas decoration that was hanging on a building. "Peee—aaaa—cccc..."

Finally he asked, "MiMi, what do those words say?"

"Peace on Earth," I answered.

"What does that mean?" he asked.

"Well, peace on earth is when all the people all around the world get along and help each other instead of fighting or being mean to each other. *Peace on earth* are the words to the song that the angels sang to the shepherds on that first Christmas night the baby Jesus was..."

"Wait a minute," Jonah interrupted me. "Is this a real story or a pretend story?"

Now, if any of you had asked me that question, I would have said something like, "That depends on how you define 'real.' It's not a *pretend* story like a fairy tale. But, if by '*real*' you mean that every detail is literally, factually true, then it's not exactly a '*real*' story either." But you can't say that to a 5-year-old.

Fortunately, I was saved by grace. As I was trying to figure out how to answer Jonah's question, the traffic light changed. And Jonah said, "The light is green! That mean Go, MiMi!" And off we went...

But when I sat down to start working on this sermon, and I read Luke's two accounts of Jesus' ascension into heaven, Jonah's words immediately came back to me. "Wait a minute. Is this a *real* story or a *pretend* story?"

Actually, there are many stories like this in the Bible that have led me to doubt and question my faith over the years—especially when I was younger. But fortunately, there have also been many pastors, teachers, professors and authors who have helped me find my way through my doubts to a deeper understanding of God's word and a more mature faith.

For example, when I was a sophomore in college, I started to wonder if I would have to give up on being a Christian because I just couldn't believe that some of the stories in the Bible could possibly be true. I remember, as if it were just yesterday, a moment in my Old Testament Religion class when the professor declared, *"My faith is not based on the credibility of Genesis or the edibility of Jonah."* At first his words shocked me! But then, they set me free. I no longer had to try and find a way to believe things that were unbelievable in order to be a Christian. I learned that faith is not about believing in literal interpretations of the stories we read in the Bible. Faith is about believing in—trusting in—God. Faith is a relationship, not a belief.

And then, there was my homiletics professor in seminary, Dr. Dan Olson, who said, *"The Bible was not written to convey facts. The Bible was written to convey Truth."* He taught us that preparing a sermon was like a treasure hunt. The lectionary texts for the day were our clues and the Holy Spirit would lead us to the Truth hidden within the texts. As Jesus said, "If you continue in my word, you will know the Truth and the Truth will set you free."

So, what is the Truth conveyed to us through this story of Jesus' Ascension?

One of the things we discover in our treasure hunt is that the Ascension story is a transformational moment for the disciples. Prior to this the disciples were still gathering behind closed, locked doors in a room in Jerusalem. They were afraid of being seen and identified as Jesus' followers. Even though the resurrected Christ had appeared to them several times in those forty days following his death and resurrection, the disciples remained confused, conflicted and frightened. In fact, Peter decided they should just go back to Galilee, back to fishing for fish instead of people.

But after Jesus' ascension, we read that the disciples "returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God." No more talk of fishing, no more fear of the religious authorities, no more hiding.

What happened in those final moments with Jesus to cause this huge change of heart? I suppose it could have something to do with those two angels who appeared in their midst and said, "What are you standing here for? You have work to do...get on with it." But, there were also two angels at the empty tomb, and the disciples still went into hiding, so it had to be something more than the presence of angels.

For Luke, there were three things that happened, all of which culminated in the disciples' new sense of passion, purpose and joy:

First, Jesus opened their minds to understand the scripture.

After all the time the disciples had been with Jesus, after all his efforts to explain what was going to happen to him and what it meant for them, and even after his resurrection and his post-resurrection appearances, the disciples still had not caught on to the ultimate goal of Jesus' ministry.

Nowhere does this disconnect become more clear than right before Jesus' ascension. He had led the disciples two miles out of Jerusalem to Bethany, and the first thing they ask when they get there is, "Lord, is this the time when you are finally going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" The disciples simply could not let go of their belief that the goal of the promised Messiah was to set Israel free from Roman occupation.

So, Jesus shows them the short-sightedness of their vision by revealing the true meaning of the all the messianic scriptures. The disciples finally catch on to the scope of God's saving love. They finally get it! The promised Messiah did not come to change the political situation in Israel in the first century. The Messiah came to change all of history and restore all creation, by proclaiming God's love and forgiveness for all people, not only the Jewish people.

The second thing that happens is that Jesus makes it clear that his disciples have a crucial role to play in fulfilling God's overarching vision for the world.

God's redemption of the world does not take place all at once through the arrival of Jesus, the Messiah. It takes place generation after generation, through the followers of Jesus, who are empowered by the Holy Spirit to complete and fulfill the work that Jesus began.

And the third thing that happens is the blessing.

Jesus blesses them. He consecrates and commissions them for their work in the world—for taking up his mantle.

And, here's something really amazing. These same three things happen every time the followers of Jesus, anywhere in the world, come together for worship.

We gather around Jesus and we listen to scripture. And through the power of the Holy Spirit, our minds are opened to understand what these holy words mean for us—how we are called to continue doing Christ's work as individuals and as a community of faith. In the sacrament of holy communion we recommit ourselves to being the body of Christ in the world today. And right before we leave, we receive God's blessing.

The Ascension is the moment when Jesus transfers his ministry in the world to his followers. Jesus ascends. The Holy Spirit descends. And the church is born. Jesus' followers become the church—the body of Christ in the world. Each Sunday is a sort of reenactment and recommitment to "being witnesses of these things" ...witnesses to the scope and power of God's love and forgiveness.

As we heard in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, "God has made Christ the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all."

The Truth conveyed in the Ascension Story is this: God chose the institution of "the church," run by and filled with imperfect human beings, to be the vehicle through which Christ fills everything with his presence. The church, people like you and me, gathered together in the

name of Christ, we are the fullness of Christ. We complete Christ. Without us, his fullness is not full. Without us, his work is not finished. The church is the instrument of God's continued action on earth.

Now, I realize that when we think about all the hurtful and misguided policies of "the church" that have been responsible for so many ungodly acts through the centuries, and when we see the state of the church at this time in history, it may appear that Paul overestimated the church. It certainly appears that we have fallen far short of Paul's vision.

But here's the thing: In every church, large or small, flourishing or struggling, even those churches that are closing, incredible good is being done in the name of Christ every day. The sick are being visited, the dying are being comforted, the hungry are being fed, the homeless and refugees being sheltered. Christ's followers are advocating for justice, sharing their time, talent and treasure, praying for peace and reconciliation, worshipping God and trying to be forgiving and loving in their daily lives. The church is still striving to "be witnesses of these things."

Before we finish, I have a couple stories for you. The first is a *pretend* story. And the second is a *real* story.

Once upon a time, there was a knight in shining armor riding along a path through the forest. He was on his way to join the rest of the king's men at the castle in preparation for a great battle. As he was riding along, he heard something. He stopped and listened. It was a tiny voice shouting, "Beware! Beware! The sky is falling! The sky is falling!"

The knight followed the sound of the tiny voice to a sparrow, lying on his back next to the path with his feet pushing upward toward the sky.

"The sky is falling?" the knight asked the sparrow.

"Yes! Beware!" the sparrow answered, pushing up with his tiny feet,

"And **you** are going to stop it?" asked the knight.

"One does what one can," replied the determined sparrow.

"One does what one can."

And now, the *real* story:

At the beginning of this sermon, I mentioned that our grandson Jonah had worshipped with us at St. Cyprian's in March. After worship, when we were driving home, I asked him, "So, what did you think of our church?"

Jonah was quiet a minute, and then he replied, "Well, it was really boring, and I didn't like that round thing you gave me to eat. It tasted like plastic! But, everybody loved me, so I'm goin' back."

My friends, there's no need for us to worry about the future of the church or the future of St. Cyprians. Christ has bound himself to us in love. We are his body. He will not be separated from us. Our work is to keep "doing what we can" to "be witnesses of these things," ...to keep "doing what we can" to bear witness to this love that empowers and blesses us every day of our lives...to keep "doing what can" to help people who enter these doors, or meet us out in the world, experience God's love and forgiveness through our words and actions.

In closing, these moving words from the wise and witty, Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor:

"No matter how hard we try in the church, we will always mess some things up. And no matter how badly we mess some things up in the church, other things will keep turning out right, because we are not, thank God, in charge. Who is in charge? Just search for any scrap of the church that is still standing—any place where God is still worshiped, any bunch of faces that are still turned toward the light—and you will see him there bending over them, his hand raised in endless blessing. It is he who fills all in all, whose fullness has spilled over into us. It is Christ the Lord." Amen.