

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty....

We believe in Jesus Christ...Born of Mary...suffered...crucified...died...rose again....he ascended into heaven....

Today we hear two version of the Ascension of our Lord. One from Luke, another from The Acts of the Apostles. You may notice that the timelines (there's that time thing again) are a bit different. But we will set that aside for another day.

I'd like to focus on the actual event Luke describes. It's pretty sensational, don't you think? Jesus is with the disciples and then he is taken up into heaven right before their very eyes. I mean, did he dematerialize, Star Trek style, and rematerialize at God's right hand? Was he lifted, (Luke says "carried", Acts, "Lifted up") up by supernatural beings? ...angels?? We don't know. All in all, this feel like a pretty fantastic tale.

And yet, each Sunday, we stand and speak those words...We believe.

On Wednesday at Brown Bag Bible Study we began reading the Book of The Acts of the Apostles. We are using a translation, among others, by Eugene Peterson, called The Message. In the introduction to Acts he writes,

"Because the story of Jesus is so impressive—God among us! God speaking a language we can understand! God acting in ways that heal and help and save us!—there is a danger that we will be impressed, but only be impressed. As the spectacular dimensions of this story slowly (or suddenly) dawn upon us, we could easily become enthusiastic spectators, and then let it go at that—become admirers of Jesus, generous with our 'oohs and aahs', and in our better moments inspired to imitate him.

It is Luke's task to prevent that, to prevent us from becoming mere spectators of Jesus, [to be more than simply] fans of the Message....."¹

So, just what is it the Ascension of Jesus the Christ means for us? How is this more than simply a fantastic tale? I wonder.

As we read the story today, we might be caught looking up into the heavens imagining Jesus looking down upon us. Perhaps we hope to catch a glimpse ourselves. And I

¹ Eugene Peterson, The Message. Introduction to Acts.

suppose it's easy to slip into living as though God is "up there" and not within. The difficulty is that we sometimes think of heaven as another place, just as there are other places in our world. But, the ascension is about presence, not absence. Jesus has told his disciples he will not leave them without a companion: Jesus has not left us.²

Fr. Richard Rohr talks about the Ascension,

"The Ascension is about the Risen Christ's promise to be present to us in a new way, even as he departs from our physical sight." This is an invitation for us to move beyond a literal understanding of the Ascension and enter into the mystery of Christ's continued presence in our lives. The Ascension reminds us that Jesus is not confined to a specific place and time, but to all places and times, in our hearts and in our minds, transforming us into his image. The Ascension is not an isolated historical event, but a living reality that continually shapes our daily lives.

Certainly, this event marks an ending, the final time that Jesus is present in body until God the Son returns. And it is a beginning as well. The disciples are no longer hiding out. But still there is the waiting. We might liken this in-between to the time between planting, and the growth, then the harvest of our Good News Garden.

Surely this time was a period of uncertainty for the disciples, their in-between time waiting for what was to come, what has been promised to them. And it will take time for them to trust in their own abilities to embody what they have been taught. It is their turn now to show God's kin-dom to others. It is our turn too. A new beginning.

Thomas R. Hawkins, in his book, Building God's People, tells it this way:

"For forty days after the resurrection, Jesus remained among the disciples. He taught, encouraged, and patiently prepared them for what was to come. Suddenly, the disciples were without their guide, their teacher, and their leader. They no longer had an authority figure in their midst to tell them what to do....."

They experience an expansion of being, an empowerment. This empowerment authorizes them for ministry and mission....."

² Michael Marsh, Interrupting the Silence, 5/21/2009, feast of the ascension.

When I was about 13 or 14, my father asked me to ride along with him as he cultivated a field of corn. It was a tricky job. The sharp blades of the cultivator had to pass between the rows of corn. If we had veered a few inches to the left or to the right, we would have plowed out four rows of tender young corn plants. The John Deere Model 70 did not have power steering, so holding the tractor and cultivator in a straight path was not always easy.

After a few rounds down the 20-acre field, my father asked me if I would like to try driving. Reluctantly, I sat down behind the steering wheel, popped the clutch, and took off down the field. Steering was harder than it looked. Forty feet of corn, in a four-row swath, were plowed out before I had driven five minutes. My father gently gave me a few suggestions as I went awkwardly—and destructively—down the field and back. After a few more rounds, my father asked me to stop the tractor. I thought he had endured all the pain he could. The carnage in the corn field was overwhelming. He would tell me to stop. I obviously was not controlling the tractor and cultivator.

Instead, my father dropped to the ground and said he had some chores to do in the barn. I was to finish the field and then come in for lunch. All morning long, in my father's absence, I plied my way back and forth across the corn field. Huge sections of corn were torn out, roots exposed to the drying sun, and stalks prematurely sliced down. But by noon I learned to handle the tractor and the cultivator.

My father's absence was a sign to me that he trusted himself and what he taught me. It also signaled that he trusted me. His absence was empowering rather than disabling. It authorized me to trust myself and trust what he had taught me. I would never have learned to cultivate corn had I worked anxiously under his critical eye, hanging on his every gesture and comment.

That is the meaning of Ascension and Pentecost. Jesus' withdrawal becomes an empowering absence. It is a sign that he trusts what he has taught us enough to set us free."³

³ Thomas R. Hawkins. Building God's People: A Workbook for Empowering Servant Leaders. Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 1990.7-9.

Endings and beginnings, life is full of both. Luke's Gospel sets an ending to the period of Jesus' ministry. The beings robed in white ask, *"Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?"* In other words, *"Don't just stand there, do something!"* So, now begins the stirrings of the Church's mission, to be the continuing presence of Christ in the world.

I'd like to point out one last thing that might escape our notice. Luke emphasizes what Jesus is doing as he departs. He is blessing his companions. And Jesus promises that he will return in the same way that he left, with blessing. I find great comfort in that.

So let us be more than fans and enthusiastic spectators of God's wonders. We are empowered in Jesus' blessing to be a blessing in the world.

Eugene Peterson concludes his introduction of Acts with this....*"The story of Jesus doesn't end with Jesus. It continues in the lives of those who believe in him. The supernatural does not stop with Jesus. Luke makes it clear that these Christians he wrote about were no more spectators of Jesus than Jesus was a spectator of God—they are in on the action of God, God acting in them, God living in them. Which also means, of course, in us."*

Amen.