

Sunday of the Ascension

Saint Paul's Episcopal Church

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Good morning Theophilus!

Luke and Acts are written to Theophilus: God lover, beloved of God, God's friend all are some of the translations and these books addressed to all as all are beloved of the creator.

It is the Sunday after the Ascension, Thursday was 40 days after Easter. The Ascension appears only in the books attributed to Luke, The Gospel of Luke and Acts. The credal statements are the only time most of us hear the Ascension mentioned. In Matthew the witnesses to the empty tomb, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, are told by the angel and Jesus 'Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.' On the mountain in Galilee there is teaching, the commission, and the promise "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Mark, ends, the first time, with the women, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, being told to go tell his disciples and Peter what had happened and to go ahead to Galilee where Jesus will meet them. While Mark says that ⁸"they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." They must have told someone because, as one commentator put it, 'the women and disciples emanating into the world like some kind of Big Bang. (Mary Hinkle Shore)

John's Gospel ends in chapter 20 with Thomas, then a sign off by the author, "30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book." John then starts up again in chapter 21 and fills the second ending with an excessive catch of fish, a breakfast on the beach for the disciples, a conversation with Peter, information about the beloved disciple, and more, "25 But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written."

Luke alone writes of a witnessed exit. This is a third edition added to Mark, "Jesus is taken up." Most scholars agree this is a much later addition. All these stories look forward into the future as the disciples are told to witness to Jesus and God's promise from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. They are to wait, ten more days by the Church's calendar, but they probably didn't know that, to receive the power to be that witness.

Is the Ascension literal or literary, fact, mystical or metaphor and does that matter? Bp John Shelby Spong likes to tell the story of Carl Sagan, American astronomer, astrophysicist, "If Jesus literally ascended into the sky and traveled at the speed of light, then he hasn't yet escaped our galaxy." As Paul Moore has quoted, "All stories are true, some of them actually happened." I would add that they all have something to teach us. What is the author of Luke saying to the first Century and how do we respond to this event today?

Jesus has left the disciples, again. Birth, death, resurrection and now ascension. The disciples are instructed in Luke to "...stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." And in Acts the instructions include ... not to

leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." Along with the instruction to wait they are not to conjecture about when the kingdom will be restored but to wait "He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

The ten days between The Ascension and Pentecost is another liminal time for the disciples and for us. A kind of Holy Saturday with rejoicing and praise. Jesus is gone again but he has been experienced as risen. Jesus also has again promised that the Holy Spirit will come soon. Another enforced time of waiting, of wondering and yes praying, praising and rejoicing. As Jesus left the disciples waiting for the advocate so we are now waiting for end of lockdown and demanding a return to 'normal.' Or are we to reclaim the Good News that was created in Mark's 'Big Bang'?

We are in an enforced time of waiting and this time creates the opportunity to engage in the practice of discernment and sabbath. The business can be put aside and we can consider those who are important to the functioning of society and immersing ourselves in the daily life of this world. As we slow down and take time to listen, this is all work, for where we are to be involved in the healing of God's creation.

The disciples asked "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" Jesus has beaten death, he could easily take out the Romans and the

Temple hierarchy. The disciples are still looking for the human version of the Kingdom, with white stallions and large swords, losing the vision of God's Kingdom, the joining of heaven and earth, the two halves of creation. In our demanding to go back to normal are we losing our vision of the Kingdom.

Demanding the human kingdom where worthiness is measured by productivity and self-worth by business? We celebrate our essential heroes, as we are laying off health care workers because they are not generating enough revenue. Labor is capital and they are not productive enough. Is that the kingdom we want to hold on to?

Yakima County has the highest Covid 19 infection rate of any county in the West and the essential agricultural workers are picketing for better protection and more than minimum wage. While they are being yelled at by passers-by to be free and get back to work. Is that the normal we want to go back to?

Churches have been declared essential and their buildings to be open for full worship. As has been pointed out churches have never closed, just their buildings. In the East three churches that had opened have reentered lockdown because they have become super-spreaders with many ill and some dead. Think of the Skagit Valley Choral incident. Is this the normal we want to go back to?

Which story will we choose; the domination kingdom of oppression of the many for the benefit of the few. Or the second story; moving toward the covenant with the promise of justice, beneficence in the commandment of love God, love neighbor and hardest of all love self? Tell yourself that you are loved, just as you are. Is the real sin of the created ones the individualism that stalks our lives and separates us from each other and God? We are constantly called to repent, to turn

back to the path, but are unwillingly to do so and fail to hear and respond to the suffering of the widow and the orphan, to abuse the resident alien. Do we need to repent of ignoring the hungry and giving no food, thirsty and giving nothing to drink, seeing a stranger and not welcoming them, seeing them naked and not clothing them, knowing they are sick or in prison and do not visit them. It can be very hard to see the face of Jesus in the other. Is this story, the story of domination, the one that we cannot or will not move from because we have always done it this way and anything else is unknown and scary. I fear that I will lose fill in the blank _____.

The second story to respond to the hopes of the world around us as we witness to the Good News to ends of the earth. The Good News that started with Creation, moves through the Law the Prophets and the Psalms and comes out in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Now at the Ascension, will we be a people who are willing to wait for the promises of God to open our hearts to the scripture? As Mary Oliver put it: "My work is loving the world, which is mostly standing still and learning to be astonished." Or will we stand still, gazing up toward heaven, unwilling to look beyond the feet disappearing into the clouds, trusting that two people in white robes will ask; why do you stand looking up toward heaven?