

St. John's Lutheran, Albany
17 May 2015

7 Easter – B

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

1 John 5:9-13

John 17:6-19

The text for the sermon is this, from today's gospel: *"I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word."*

And it is also this, from the readings appointed for Ascension Day, which was this past Thursday, May 14, from the first chapter of Ephesians: *I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints. And for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ...may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation...so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which God has called you.*

Ascension Day comes and goes unnoticed most of the time. It came and went unnoticed this past week, on Thursday. I saw on their sign board that the Missouri Synod Lutherans on Nott Terrace in Schenectady were observing it. And the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception had a mass for it. But mostly Ascension Day passes our notice. And this is largely, I believe, because it passes our understanding. Ascension Day is weird. And it's unsettling.

We don't know what to think. We don't know what image to fix our minds on: is it that of Jesus lifting off into the heavens like a helium balloon some child at Tulip Fest has lost? Because that's not a satisfying image. And what it leaves behind is nothing. Nothing at all. A balloon, disappearing. Pffft!! But what other image do we have?

Today's gospel records Jesus saying in his farewell discourse, on that last night with his friends, *And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world.*

That's what he said. And then he died. And then rose. But then he left. Again.

Jesus left.

Being left is hard. It's *so* hard.

But—the truth is, from the biblical records, we know that the disciples expected Jesus’ speedy return. He told them he would come back. So in first century Christendom the question rose very early on about whether or not those who died after Jesus’ ascension, but before his return, would be included in those whom he saved.

In 1 Thessalonians, the earliest canonical writings from the first half of the first century CE, Paul says, “But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters,* about those who have died,* so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. ¹⁴For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died....we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died.”

What a confusing thing salvation has always been! Even early on in that first century church—or churches, since there were no institutional, organized (or disorganized) structures such as we call the church--there was grief over loved ones who might not be saved because they had already died. And later on—centuries, millennia later, but into our time today—people express a different grief, an existential grief, a hopelessness about a life beyond the one we know: we hope for more, but we steel ourselves for less. Death, we say, is the end of things, as we fear it may be.

So no wonder the Ascension of Jesus confounds us. Because whatever it means to experience salvation, whatever it means to be united in eternal communion with the one who loved us first and loves us most—whatever that means—*that* is a mystery well and deftly hidden from us.

Because we are here and we long—still—for those things that we have lost, some of them apparently forever. We long for dreams or carefree days. We long for our children’s childhoods (that’s my particular sadness and longing) or our own childhoods. We long for a lost love, or a partner, or our health, our youth, our physical agility. We long. We know what that means. So if Jesus ascends and leaves us, why look? Why long for *him*, too?

And I think that explains why we are reluctant to celebrate the Ascension of Jesus. Because it is just too hard—way too hard—to celebrate loss. Who wants to celebrate being left behind? Absence, for all its cliché-ed capacity to make the hard grow fonder, also hurts like hell.

The Episcopal priest and writer, Barbara Brown Taylor, looks at it this way. She says, “What makes absence hurt, what makes it ache, is the memory of what used to be there, but is no longer. Absence is the arm flung across the bed in the middle of the night, the empty space where the beloved sleeper once lay. Absence is the child’s room now empty and hung with silence and dust. Absence is the

overgrown lot where the old house once stood, the house in which people laughed and thought their happiness would last forever.”

But then she says this and in this I think we hear hope, we hear gospel. Because she goes on: “You cannot miss,” Barbara Brown Taylor says, “what you have never known, which makes our sense of absence—and especially our sense of God’s absence—the very best proof that we knew God once and that we may know God again. There is loss in absence, but there is also hope because what happened once can happen again and only an empty cup can be filled. It is only when we pull that cup out of hiding, when we own up to the emptiness, the absence, the longing inside—it is only then that we can begin to change.”

You see, with these words, Barbara Brown Taylor’s thinking leads me back to John’s gospel and to Jesus’ Farewell Discourse with his friends when he tells them that, yes, he is leaving them: *I will not leave you orphaned...But the Advocate,* the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.*²⁷ *Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.*

The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, who leads us in truth is here, with us, in us. It’s just that, unlike the Jesus of history who walked the pathways of Palestine and eat and laughed and preached and healed and wept and suffered, the Holy Spirit broods among us, waits among us, cooing so softly the words of renewal, the worlds of love, that in the din of human existence, it is hard to hear and sometimes even harder to listen.

And yet—we are not alone. We are not orphaned. God is absent as Jesus, but God is present as the Comforter, the Advocate, the Paraclete in whom we live and move and have our being. And while we cannot choose to be justified by grace, while we cannot make a decision for Jesus, since God already made that decision for us, we can indeed choose to listen for the voice of—or the wind of—the Holy Spirit. We can indeed be Pentecost people (even a week early!)—opening ourselves in humbleness to the Spirit’s calling, knowing that our first and confounding blessing is that we don’t know the whole story, but can trust that the Spirit—God bless her!—reveals our role in it, moment by moment and probably even more so if we bring ourselves to stop worrying about everything else and pay attention. Which is a tough calling, but still a worthy and Spirit-filled pursuit.

And so we come back to the Ascension Day conundrum: Why *should* we stand around looking up toward heaven? Or--why should we fret about the promised return of God when the promised presence of God is already being fulfilled in our midst?

Remember the words of assurance from today’s gospel. Jesus said to his friends: *I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word.*”

We live to keep God's word. That is our calling. That is our motivation. That is our delight and our mission.

We have the body of Christ right beside us in one another. And we have the body of Christ inside each time we come forward to receive the sacrament. And we have the Holy Spirit of God infusing our hearts and our desires so that, if we want to, we can work to make real the peace that Christ left with us, the love that God sheds upon us, the mercy that attends our being.

Why should we stand looking up toward heaven when so much compels us to seek God in our midst—not a sage in flowing robes, but the Spirit that animates and connects the little Christs (as Luther has named us) that God has made us to?

And so—why stand looking heavenward for the Jesus who has already left us behind with his peace and his promise? Why stand looking heavenward when the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, will lead us into truth, if only we will listen and take heed. If only we will take our gaze from the heavens and look at what is before us: the body of Christ of which we are a supple and praising part.

Why stand looking heavenward when the word of God reminds us that, rather than looking upward, it is our responsibility no less than our bliss to bless the God in our midst and look around at where the little Christ is revealed in each of us. Look around. Look around!

Amen.