

Easter 7

Ascension of our Lord

Readings: Psalm 47
 Acts 11: 1 – 11
 Ephesians 1: 15 – 23
 Luke 24: 44 – 53

We've probably seen the launching of space rockets on television or at the movies. They usually have a count-down before someone says "lift off!" The ascension of Jesus was a kind of launching into outer space too; not with rocket boosters or in a space shuttle, but it was a lift off nonetheless. Can you do a countdown with me and then shout out "lift off!" 10 – 9 – 8 – 7 – 6 – 5 – 4 – 3 – 2 – 1 – "lift off!"

Ascension Day as a liturgical celebration often gets overlooked in the period between Easter and Pentecost. The intensity of Lent was released in the high spirits of Easter with triumphant music, alleluia hymns, stirring preaching about the victory of life over death, and, not forgetting to mention, hot-cross buns. Pentecost is just around the corner with perhaps multi-lingual aspects to the service, flame decorations and people wearing something red to celebrate the birthday of the church. Who then can muster much energy for Ascension Day? It doesn't quite have the same impact for us as does Christmas, Good Friday, Easter or Pentecost. The ascension, in a way, leaves the church hanging in limbo without us knowing what to do or how to respond. It's as if something doesn't feel quite right or working

properly; where we might say, as it was said on Apollo 13: “Houston, we have a problem.”

The biblical story itself is difficult to get excited about. We are not accustomed to seeing or even imagining bodies being lifted up into the clouds. The text from Acts 1:1-11 also previews Pentecost so strongly that it is hard not to jump ahead and focus on the coming of the Spirit.

Yet, the ascension of Jesus made it into both the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds, along with other confessions of faith. Part of confessing Jesus is affirming that:

“the third day he rose from the dead,
he ascended into heaven,
and sitteth on the right hand of the Father,” (Apostles’ Creed)

And each year the lectionary cycle presents the same texts, to be used on Ascension Day or the seventh Sunday of Easter. Is there something we might rediscover in this narrative that can speak an important word to our contemporary context?

On the one hand, this story is all about Jesus. It is his miraculous and mysterious departure from this world. Jesus had come to earth from heaven, and now returns to reign at the right hand of God. The way Jesus leaves is just as mysterious as his birth and resurrection. It’s really hard to get our scientific heads around things that seem impossible and out of the ordinary.

On the other hand, this story is all about the disciples and us. It is the event that changes the focal point of Christ's work and ministry from Jesus himself to those who follow him. Jesus is no longer here to preach good news, heal the sick, and feed the hungry. The mission now falls to the disciples. But it is something they do not seem focused upon. Instead, they are stand around gazing up toward heaven; looking to something they no longer can see; looking to something they cannot do anything about. Perhaps, it was easier to do that rather than looking ahead to real places, real people and real situations that demand their attention and response.

But being given a task or a mission was not new to the disciples. Luke and the other Synoptic Gospels recount the sending of the twelve (Lk. 9:1-6) and the seventy (Lk. 10:1-12) to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick. In these mission trips the disciples understood that Jesus was sending them and that they would return to him when they were finished.

Now, however, things are very different. There is no Jesus to come back to. The disciples are on their own to face the challenges ahead without their teacher and leader; the one who often spoke up for them and defended them against accusations by the religious authorities. While they are told that the Spirit will come at, some unknown point in time, and will eventually empower them for their task; until then, what are they to do?

The ascension story is also a story about waiting. It is about being in the interim time; a time after a significant event while moving towards another

with some uncertainty.¹ For the disciples, they may have experienced something similar when Jesus left them at his crucifixion up until their resurrection encounter with him. After a period of forty days with Jesus, the disciples were full of expectation that this was the time that all their hopes and the promises of Jesus would be realised. And when asked, Jesus responded that the time was not theirs to know; and that the Holy Spirit would come, but not now.

It's not difficult to imagine the disciples' feelings after all this. After all they had experienced, the disciples were alone again. Will Jesus' absence be temporary, a few days, just like the last time? Jesus was now gone; not concealed in a tomb relatively near to them, but in the sky somewhere inaccessible to the disciples. They were left wondering and waiting; speculating the Spirit's arrival and, perhaps, whether Jesus might drop down from the clouds. The followers of Jesus found themselves in an uncomfortable space we know as "between."²

Perhaps we too can connect our experiences of being in the midst of uncertainty or expectation; that uncomfortable space. While we crave resolution and desperately want to turn the page of this event to the next chapter; in this story, we are invited to dwell with the disciples in the "between" space. We know well these kinds of time: when a congregation loses its minister and contemplates its future ministry; the loss of a loved

¹ Jeffrey D. Peterson-Davis, "Pastoral Perspective on Acts 1:1-11," in *Feasting on the Word*, (Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 2, Lent through Eastertide), David . Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (eds.), 502-06, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 506.

² Ibid

one and the refocusing of family relations; unemployment and the search for the next job opportunity; broken relationships and the building of new ones; the few weeks or days remaining before a grown child leaves home; waiting for a baby to be born; awaiting the results of a medical test; watching as a parent slips away to Alzheimer's.³

Rather than rush to the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, in this text of Acts, today we are challenged to enter the unresolved time and space created by the ascension. It is a time and space to reflect on the things in our faith and church life that may be uncomfortable or awkward for us. It is a time to think about people, events or situations that make us feel vulnerable or abandoned or lost in terms of our purpose; the mission to which we have been called to do. How do these things affect our mission? And where do they leave us? Do they leave us gazing out to something that is out of our reach and control?

This interim or “between” space is also an opportunity to refocus our attention to what is ahead of us, what is out there; rather than what is up there. Jesus told his disciples that their immediate focus should be Jerusalem and that their task there was only to wait. They needed to focus on what they could do and leave God to do what God will do. Sky-gazing only brings the question (as in the case of the two men in white robes) “why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” (Acts 1:11). Perhaps these messengers were challenging the disciples that it was time to stop staring at

³ Ibid

the clouds and get going to where they were called to be and to do what they were called to do.

Despite this “in-between period” without Christ in their midst any longer, as they were once used to, the disciples knew one thing for sure – there was no going backwards. There was no looking back for what used to be. There was only the way ahead, though relatively unknown, but one they must take, nonetheless, with the hope that Jesus will do what he said he would do; that the promised Spirit will be realised in their life. “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses.”

From the “in-between” period, they were to move on to being witnesses for Christ. Instead of remaining in a situation where they can only despairingly try and glimpse Jesus in the sky, Jesus, in effect, said to them “you are the ones to be seen; you are the ones to be heard; you are my witnesses. When people see you, hear you and know you, they will know me.” Their mission was not to look up, but to look ahead; not to look into empty space and see nothing, but to create a space or opportunity for people to look at them and see something important for their life – to see Christ. No matter where they were to testify to Christ, whether in the city (Jerusalem), in the nation (all Judea), in the surrounding nations (Samaria), and in the entire world (Acts 1:8), the hope was that the Jesus who disappeared into the clouds, would be seen again in a new way – through the life and testimony of his followers.

It is the same for us in the church today. Christ has set before us the work of bearing witness to him where we are right here in this place, even beyond these walls and premises, in our neighbourhoods and in our city, and even to the ends of the earth. We do so with the hope that others will be able to recognise something of Christ in and through us.

Hearing this commission can be staggering to accept. Bearing witness to Christ in a world that suffers and perhaps does not want to hear or know about Christ can be difficult and overwhelming. Maybe we feel that we cannot cope with the suffering and injustice we see. Perhaps the responsibility of witnessing to Christ makes us feel uncomfortable and awkward. This might be why Jesus told his disciples to wait for the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. We can't do it on our own; on our own ability and in our own strength. We need something of God in our life. We need that which can help us be what God calls us to be and do what God called to do. We are to be witnesses to Christ; the vehicle or expression of his love which reveals Christ to people whenever and wherever we are in the world.

Perhaps a prayer commonly attributed to Teresa of Avila (1515-82) that poetically expresses this reality may be helpful to us:

“God of love, help us to remember
that Christ has no body now on earth but ours,
no hands but ours, no feet but ours.
Ours are the eyes to see the needs of the world.
Ours are the hands with which to bless everyone now.

Ours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good.”⁴

Amen.

⁴ Teresa of Avila, quoted in Dorothy M. Stewart, *The Westminster Collection of Christian Prayers*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 70.