

Ascension- May 24, 2009
Church of the Holy Spirit, Vashon Island
Acts 1:1-11, Ephesians 1:15-23
Luke 24:44-53

Jesus, make of me what you will make of me, while you be what I love. Amen.

Today, we remember and celebrate the ascension of the risen Christ. The two readings we heard, from Luke and from Acts are the only places in the New Testament, besides the appendix to Mark, in which the ascension is explicitly described. This glorious event is alluded to in Paul's letters to the Romans and to the Ephesians, and it is briefly hinted at in the gospel of John, but it is here at the end of the Lukan gospel and again at the beginning of its sequel, the book of Acts, that we see this heavenly mystery described.

In Acts, a cloud and two men in white robes aid Jesus in his ascension. It says, "as the disciples were watching, **he was lifted up**, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them" (1:9-10).

The account in the gospel of Luke reads, "While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and **was carried up into heaven**" (24:51). The biblical descriptions of this event are brief and relatively one-sided, appearing only in Luke-Acts. However, the brevity doesn't in any way diminish the importance of this theological concept in Christianity.

We recall and profess faith in the ascension every time we gather for worship. In the Nicene Creed, we pray, "For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated on the right hand of the Father." And in Eucharistic prayers A and D, we remember the ascension. The prayer we will use tonight says, "We celebrate the memorial of our redemption, O Father, in this sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. Recalling his death, resurrection, and ascension, we offer you these gifts."

What I am getting at is that the ascension is as central to our faith as the crucifixion and the resurrection, even though Holy Scripture, theological writings, and our attention are heavily focused on the crucifixion and resurrection, **not** the ascension.

The ascension is the guarantee of Christian destiny. It means that God's promise is realized in the pouring out of the Spirit by the risen/ascended Christ. Through the ascension, we have received the Holy Spirit and are now witnesses to Christ. The theme of the entire book of Acts is summed up in chapter one, verse eight, "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." Jesus says this to his apostles and he says this to us, just before he ascends into heaven. These are his parting words. And it is in baptism that the power of the Holy Spirit comes upon us and ever thereafter we are called and commissioned and obligated to be Christ's witnesses to the ends of the earth.

As one theologian puts it, the ascension, "serves as a critical hinge point in sacred history, connecting the earthly ministry of Jesus to his presence through the spirit in the life of the Christian community" (Weissenbuehler, Wayne. Interpretation 46 Ja 1992 p. 61-65).

Jesus' relationship to the mission of the Kingdom of God was forever changed in that moment when he was lifted up. Now, Jesus' relationship to the Kingdom of God is through the Holy Spirit and through our witness as God's people to the ends of the earth. That is a steep responsibility. The ascension is what propels and compels us "to do and to teach." It is our turn.

The disciples and early followers of Jesus were experiencing tremendous change and undergoing drastic transition. Their whole world was in upheaval and the future completely uncertain. That is a scary place to be. If we think Lent, Holy Week, and Easter are an exhausting emotional roller coaster ride, can you imagine how the disciples and friends of Jesus must have felt during the original Lent and Passiontide. They saw Jesus executed, mourned his death, and saw him rise from the grave. Jesus didn't just

resurrect either; he vanished, reappeared, vanished, and showed up again, just when they least expected it.

In a very different way, this community is experiencing a roller coaster of sorts. Only one year ago, John and Joan were preparing to leave this community with all of the uncertainty, excitement, and fear that goes along with that sort of transition. And now, here you are again, one year later, facing the same changes all over again. It isn't easy.

During times of stress and ambiguity, the Benedictine model of spirituality always comes to mind. The Benedictine model is a triangle with each of the points representing an aspect of our faith and rhythm of life. The three points are: stability, obedience, and conversion of life. They are constantly in tension with one another and sometimes our triangle gets pulled heavily in one direction. Stability is in short supply right now and conversion of life, often the most difficult aspect, is how things are going to be for a while.

My hope in this transition, for you and for me, is that we can explore our obedience, our obedience to God and to one another as we prayerfully move through our transitions. It seems trite to say that God has a plan and I don't really buy into that, but I do think the Holy Spirit works in us and through us in surprising and unusual ways. You just never know what She is up to.

As Jesus was ascending, his final human action was to bless the people. Jesus blesses us and if we trust that blessing and obey that blessing, everything is going to be all right. Amen.