

SUNDAY AFTER THE ASCENSION I Peter 4:7 Jo. 15:26ff

In the Name of the God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen+

If you have ever paid attention to how we learn to communicate in the earliest stages of life, you know it is with signs and symbolic motions. No one ever arrived on this planet with the full-blown capacity to speak the King’s English or any native tongue. What seems to occur is that we have images and pictures of objects or events which then have words attached to them. Imagine how Helen Keller must have struggled to make sense out of her world since she was blind, deaf, and unable to get those essential sensory signals. When our children were young and starting to learn words, it was through pictures. Some of you will remember a set of books by the author, Richard Scarry, which were all the rage 40+ years ago. They had hundreds and thousands of cartoon images of animals doing all the things we humans do, and to each a word or action was attached. It allowed children to make the critical connections between what they heard, but already had seen, and this is because language has to have a referent point in experience in order to make sense.

Today is the last Sunday in Easter, the Sunday after the Ascension. When you hear that word, Ascension, what comes to mind? Because we think spatially in terms of 3 dimensions, it is normal to view Jesus’ ascension as ‘going up’ as if he had reserved a launch pad at Cape Canaveral. Look at so much of the medieval art like Giotto’s painting and it is cast in just his way. But that form of literalism is like taking a child’s book of pictures and expecting reality to be like the images in it.

We read so much of Scripture from the point of view of the Enlightenment even though we do not realize it. That period in history saw the rise of sciences, reason, empirical measurements, and it left little room for mystery and certainly not for anything above nature. Take a look at Thomas Jefferson’s Greek New Testament as an example. He did a little cut and paste job prior to computers. He took out everything that did not stand up to reason and what is left is a Jesus who is a good guy with solid moral teachings, but really nothing more. In that frame of reference, the Ascension is a nice story, but held by people of rather limited sophistication and understanding, because anyone can see that you can’t find heaven by just going ‘UP’. There is too much going on here for this to be a simple geometrical description, and simple reason is not capable of delving its depth!

All of the Gospel accounts seem to make less of the direction of Jesus’ departure as they point to the reality of God’s action which leaves a lasting and permanent mark on creation and on us. If you recall the book of etchings by Marvin Hayes that appeared in the 1970s there is one of the Ascension. In it Jesus is depicted as carrying all of his humanity with him, even as the disciples try to cling to what they have known rather than look to what God will now lead them to do; live in light of the defeat of death. The notes on the etching pointing to the way life has become transformed say, “No longer are graves places to which we are doomed, but locations from which we rise light”. The invitation the Scriptures are inviting us into is to move beyond the description of an ancient event, beyond modernist doubts, and to realize that “the end of all things is at hand, that is, the culmination (not closure) of human life is now to be found in Jesus, who when he was lifted up on the cross would take all human suffering, fear, hope, struggle into himself and elevate it to a place of light and hope.

St. Leo the Great, in his sermon on the Ascension, proclaimed, “When death launched its attack upon him he burst its bounds and robbed it of its power. And his Ascension? With all due solemnity we are commemorating that day on which our poor human nature was carried up in Christ above all the hosts of heaven, above all ranks of angels, beyond the highest heavenly powers to the very throne of God the Father...in spite of the withdrawal from our sight of everything that is rightly felt to command our reverence, faith does not fail, hope is not shaken, charity does not grow cold.” In short, the Ascension, is Jesus being placed above all brokenness, all loss of hope, all tragedy of human existence and standing as the emblem of God's unbreakable bond to His creatures. And second—do not miss this—the Ascension is the act of God by which our nature, with all its challenges, is lifted up and blessed and named as part of the sacredness of God's own life. Jesus' ascension is taking us to be part of God's life, to the that place beyond space as we know it, where no darkness of human existence can encroach or diminish our place in God's life. No sin or failure is too deep to escape the Ascension. The culmination of all things is at hand indeed.

Herman Melville, the 19th century author, used the image of the vastness of the stormy sea to depict this sense of things we fear will diminish us and that we cannot control. If you have stood on the NC coast and watched storms you have a visual idea of Melville's point. In his great novel, Moby Dick, he unfolds the story of this eternal battle to come to terms with the forces beyond our management. Ahab, the antagonist of the novel is a man driven conquer that which haunts him, a great white whale (the vastness of human sin). Wounded by this denizen, unwilling to face his limits, and driven by pride, he frightens all who come into his sphere of influence. In a poignant scene Ahab, standing on the foredeck of his ship, looking down at a fearful and confused crew who are ready to mutiny, says, “**a man needs to feel something in this slippery world that holds**”. Unwittingly perhaps Ahab in saying this also gives voice to another reality. He reminds that we need to feel something that HOLDS; that is, something that lasts and can be trusted which time does not erode or disintegrate. It is not merely something we grasp, but someone who grasps us. Someone in whose holding we can find security and assurance when our own efforts fall short and our own resources meet their end, which they inevitable will. We need to be encountered by One who stands in the middle of this fragile life, knows full well the threats we feel, and who can remind us that these things are not the final descriptors, images, or words about us.

Former Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple said, “The ascension of Christ is his liberation from all restrictions of time and space. It does not represent his removal from earth, but his constant presence everywhere on earth.” Christ now fills and sanctifies all time and space. The grace of the ascension is that “Christ is all in all!” (Col. 3:11). The unity of humanity and divinity revealed in the incarnation is brought to fullness in the ascension.

So, what does that word, Ascension, mean to you? What images does it evoke? It isn't about a once upon a time event in time and space now over and done. It is about the ongoing reality that the love God has for us has been made final and lasting. Amen+