

Sermon May 13, 2018 Ascension Sunday

Acts 1:1-11, Ephesians 1:15-23, Luke 24:44-53

The Feast of Ascension is, and I am a bit sad to say it, one of a category of feasts that has been falling out of the calendars of many churches I notice. As Christian observance becomes less and less an organizing norm in our west coast culture, almost all feasts that do not fall on Sundays become harder to keep. One solution is to move them to the nearest Sunday, as we are doing today, and I think this is the case with Ascension Day in many parishes, that is, if it is observed at all.

The Ascension of Jesus would traditionally have been celebrated last Thursday because that day marked the wonderfully biblical number of forty days after Easter. Celebrating the feast on its intended Thursday is wonderful in a number of ways, and not least because it makes a kind of balancing symmetry with the forty days of Lent coming before Easter. But most of all I like Ascension on its Thursday because that gives the Ascension its own day, a day when we can focus fully on its message, without distraction. It is no accident that the largest and most prominent stained glass window in this church depicts the Ascension of Jesus. In that context, it is worth remembering that Ascension used to be a significant holiday outside the church as well. Some

of you may have grown up in places where it was kept as a bank holiday or a day off school. It still is a day off in a number of places. The Wikipedia article mentions a dozen and a half countries on at least three continents where that is still the case. So what happened?

Well, I think it has to be faced that people have important questions about the Ascension. As I have mentioned before, I think that has to do, partly, with some of the developments in technology since 1950. Before that, if we said that someone had gone to heaven there was a gesture we could make that would make that physically evident. We could point to heaven. We knew where it was. After 1950, not so much. Especially after St. Francis Day, October 4th 1957 when the first human made satellite was launched into low earth orbit, that became a question for people. After Sputnik, and especially after Apollo (not the Greek god, but the American lunar missions), people saw the earth in a different context. There was a paradigm shift that has affected every human being on Earth. Interplanetary space became a reality we experience. For many, that meant that heaven must be elsewhere. Perhaps that has left many of us on Ascension Day, not knowing where to look, as it were, so some of us have simply been looking away, emphasizing other feasts. This paradigm shift may, in the long run, prove a blessing for

Christians. It is an opportunity for us to have people think in a more spiritually focused, more *incarnational* way about the Kingdom and the Gospel. We are making a change in our thinking that I think Jesus worked hard during his earthly life to *have* us make. We are shifting from thinking of heaven as a material realm, a physical place we would have lived in the future, to being a spiritual realm we live in *now*. In my view that is a step in the right direction. It brings us closer to the truth of our experience and makes it clearer what *action* we need to take toward our ultimate purpose as human beings.

But it also means that on Ascension Day we need to focus more on what happened for the *Disciples* than on the mechanics of how and to where Our Lord ascended. The Ascension of Our Lord was a paradigm shift for them as well, in fact one of profound magnitude. This is signified in the scriptures in the fact that the Ascension marks both the end of the Gospel of Luke and the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles.

A similar thing happened of course for Elisha, the disciple of Elijah, when the great prophet of the Books of Kings ascended on the whirlwind. In spite of Elijah's best efforts and frequent entreaties that he not do so, Elisha saw Elijah carried up, and when Elijah threw down his cloak, he caught it and with it a

double share of the prophet's spirit. It meant that the ministry of Elijah, and all that entailed, now rested entirely with Elisha. It was the moment when Elisha came into his own.

This is exactly how it is for the disciples of Jesus on Ascension Day. They have caught the cloak of Jesus, received His mantle. The ministry that He began, that of transforming humanity and bringing the Kingdom, now belongs to them. They become His hands and feet and eyes and ears in the world. It seems important to say, on Ascension Sunday, that this was part of the plan. This was the *purpose* of Easter, of Good Friday, that we would be transformed into the people we were born to be. This transformation is the meaning of Ascension Day. It was *not* that Jesus would do the work of transforming the world so that we would not have to. A purpose of Easter and of Resurrection was to open our eyes to see the way before us so that we can do our part in bringing God's creation to its fulfillment.

To me it is *good* news that I still have a part to play, even if, as I must admit, I *have* at times been a bit slow in getting around to actually doing it. On that score, I take comfort on at least two fronts: **firstly** that as I look around me I see that I am not alone in being slowish in doing my part to become a fully transformed human being in order to bring about a fully transformed world; and

secondly because the hope of that transformation has not completely died in me. It burns in my heart still, and along with it the hope that great patience goes along with God's infinite goodness. I am still hoping, trusting, that God can hang on long enough for me, for *us*, to get it together.

And the great thing is that we *do*. We do get it together. We *are* transformed at times. There are flashes of our greatness, of the fulfillment of our purpose, moments when the Kingdom *breaks in*. I've experienced this in-breaking of the Kingdom very deeply in our ministry with refugees for example. I can recall few things in the whole of my life in the church that were so clearly motivated by a movement of the Holy Spirit. It's not that I or the Parish Council or any other leader decided or initiated it. The movement to reach out to refugees simply *welled* up from the grass roots. We just all suddenly *knew* we had to do it. Out of that energy the connection with Lisa Cooper was made, and the compelling story of her personal connection with displaced Syrian people living in a canvas shelter in Beirut pressed us into action. All the communities around us were caught up in this movement and money for refugees just seemed to pour in. It was the most beautiful and holy thing — a movement of the spirit that *everyone* was caught up in. We felt that greatness, that movement, that in-breaking of the Kingdom in so many ways both great and small at

different times: the benefit concert and the presence of Farooq Al-Sajee was one that was shared through national tv coverage on Global. Being invited to the Ismaeli centre for an evening presentation. Being there with Lisa. Being at the airport to welcome Zakaryah, our first, arrival was an unforgettable moment of God's grace and goodness. The connection with the UBC student's organization that was raising money was another. Myryam and Abdl-Kareem stepping forward to become our vergers and care for our building moves my heart to this day. A very beautiful Kingdom moment was when we welcomed the whole group of our Syrian newcomers here at St. Helen's for lunch one Sunday. So wonderful! After lunch I felt so very moved and so delighted when they asked me to show them around the church here. We stood by the font and had a beautiful moment of fellowship and mutual recognition and welcome. They said how beautiful they found St. Helen's and told me about their Mosque that they attend on Fridays. So beautiful! So holy! In our conflicted world where so much conflict and violence has happened between Christians and Moslems over so many centuries, any time we can welcome one another and share hospitality together in our places of worship is a Kingdom moment and I praise that we could all be part of it! When I'm part of these things I *know* in my heart and soul that we are walking the talk and that we are following Jesus fully. Like the Disciples on Ascension we have

caught the cloak of Christ and in Refugees ministry and others we have taken it up.

And this is how the work of God often is I think. The in-breaking of the Kingdom happens in an instant, “in the twinkling of an eye” (as St. Paul so aptly put it in 1Corinthians) but it has a long tail. We catch a glimpse and we know utterly in that moment that “we shall all be changed” but we find ourselves coming back to it again and again, finding in it a kind of eternity. Easter was one of those glimpses for the disciples, *and* Ascension Day. They were so transformed by it that, thousands of years and perhaps a hundred generations later, we ourselves, who were not physically there, can keep going back to its *memory* for inspiration, for sustenance, and for an understanding of where we need to go next in our ongoing story of *our* acts as disciples.