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Acts 1:6-14
Ascension Sunday
May 8, 2005

He Ascended Into Heaven

I thought of two sermons that I could preach for you today. This being mother's day, the first sermon was to focus on women in the bible and the role that mothers play in the church. But Mothers' Day is a secular observance, and not a Christian one. There are many churches who celebrate Mother' Day of course. I remember hearing about one small church that would give awards out to the oldest mother, the youngest mother, and the mother who had raised the most children, and when they got to that award a fight broke out between two mothers, one claiming she deserved the award because she had raised five children of her own, but the other claimed that she deserved the award because she had four of her own and two step-children, and so forth.

Instead of giving out awards or flowers, we simply give thanks for mothers, for our biological mothers, and for all those mothers in the faith who go far beyond biology, who raised us and are raising our children, to love God and participate in the life of the church.

So, rather than preaching that sermon, I want to focus in on this text from Acts. Today is a bridge Sunday of sorts. It is the last Sunday of the season of Easter, sometimes called Ascension Sunday, and comes one week before the season of Pentecost. Our text narrates the opening scene of the Book of Acts. The disciples have gathered with the resurrected Jesus and they want to know when Jesus' kingdom will be established.

This kingdom is what they have been longing for since the Jesus' movement began, that Jesus, the Messiah, would come and establish a new kingdom on earth. Jesus' answer is a curious one, he says, "it is not for you to know what God has in store, but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth." And then, under the heavy and no doubt surprised gaze of his disciples, Jesus bodily ascends into heaven. The doctrine of the ascension is perhaps most well known in Christian art.

We have hundreds of depictions of this scene, Jesus, face shimmering, rising to the clouds, the stunned disciples down low looking on. Along the north aisle of the Chapel, we have this scene in stained glass – don't look now, you can find it after the service – the scene depicts several amazed disciples looking heavenward and in the top corner of the frame are Jesus' feet and only Jesus' feet leaving the frame.

This past Tuesday night I found myself in a commons room over in one of the freshmen dorms on East Campus. During the final few weeks of the semester there had been some significant misunderstanding in the dorm about appropriate ways for Christians to share their faith with other people.

And so, flanked by colleagues from other religious traditions, I spoke on behalf of all Christians everywhere, even though you weren't aware of it. It was a terrific conversation, the kind that all of us should have on a regular basis, about the meaning of

religious conviction, about how and why we witness to that conviction with others, about understanding power dynamics in relationships, and carefully analyzing our own assumptions and hidden agendas while engaged with people who are different from us.

As the clock moved towards 10pm, and the students remembered that exams were scheduled for the next morning, one freshmen spoke on behalf of much of the University community, articulating one of the dominant narratives in the academy: Objective, quantifiable thinking based on firm evidence is rational and therefore good. Whereas subjective discourse that lacks a quantifiably provable thesis is irrational and therefore bad. Biology, physics, mathematics and economics he placed in the first category. Religion, he placed in the second. Religious faith, he claimed, was not worth discussing – though it did seem odd that there we were discussing it – because, he said, there is no hard evidence for faith. You either have faith or you don't faith. It either is or it isn't. The light is either on or off. Those of us on the panel suggested that might be over simplifying things a bit, and my mind wondered to the doctrine of the ascension, and how such a doctrine might be viewed in light of this dominant modern worldview.

The church makes the audacious claim that Jesus ascended into heaven. Our inquisitive well-formed progressive minds might be tempted to bog down in what it looked like, how it happened, to work out formulas for what Jesus' rate of ascending speed must have been to overcome the power of gravity.

The ascension, though is not about geography (precisely where is the right hand of God?) or physics (how exactly did it happen?), it is much too mysterious for such categories. It is about the ongoing function of Christ in the world. When we say in the Apostles' Creed, "he ascended into heaven," we as Christians are making the bold claim that there is something cosmic at work here, something too big and grand to be limited by our narrow earth-bound categories.

This Jesus of Nazareth, born in Bethlehem's stable, a teacher, prophet, healer, friend, son of Mary, the one who suffered and died on the cross, the same Jesus has now ascended to sit at the right hand of the Creator. The ascension of Jesus claims that Jesus is Lord, not just of his home habitat, of Jerusalem and the Galilean countryside, not just Lord of our hearts, but Jesus ascends to the right hand of the father, to reign as Lord over all of creation.

The Presbyterian preacher, Catherine Taylor, says Jesus' Ascension means that Jesus took all of human life, which he cared for so deeply, and brought it into the very heart of God.

And as if that is not dramatic enough, Jesus says his on-going work will be enacted through us, his church in the power of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes the Spirit's work in the world can be seen and known in dramatic history changing events.

A hill outside of Vilnius, Lithuania is one of the world's great beacons of hope and one of the strongest pieces of evidence to support the doctrine of the ascension. Thousands upon thousands of crosses adorn the holy ground, originally placed there by the Lithuanian people in defiance of the Soviet regime, and now a destination for pilgrims carrying crosses from around the world. From 1917-1985 the Soviets bulldozed the hill again and again out of disdain for the 'ignorance and fanaticism' that it represented to them. Each day the bulldozers would come and pummel the crosses into the earth. Each night the resilient Christians of Lithuania would place crosses in the earth, as a sign, I think that their allegiance was to the Lordship of Christ and not to the

flag or nation that dominated their lives. Again and again the bulldozers would come and again and again the crosses would reappear the next day, testifying to a power far greater than military might, a visible sign of the Spirit's work, a physical reminder that Christ is Lord of all.

Eventually, the hope of the place won out. In 1985, the Soviet bulldozing campaign ended when Gorbachev said quietly, "Let them have their hill." Two years later, Lithuanian students began to demonstrate against the iron curtain. It wasn't long before others followed.

The Spirit's power in the lives of Christians is not always so dramatic. Sometimes it is small. The work of Jesus continues by the power of the Spirit wherever and whenever an act of goodness, or kindness, peace or justice, is done in Christ's name. This is what it means for the church to be the Body of Christ, to reach out to the suffering refugee, the abused child or spouse, the victim of war, the lonely one in the nursing home, the student who struggles with depression or a lost sense of worth, those who are sick, all who are in difficult transitions in life.

I'm thinking about seniors this week. Most of them are off at the beach, enjoying the last several days of their collegiate lives before they graduate next week. One of my most treasured graduation gifts was given to me by my mom. It is a clock that sits on my bookshelf at home made out of a tile from my grandparents' farm in Ohio. And on the clock is a prayer of Theresa of Avila that goes like this:

"Christ has no body on earth now but yours. No hands but yours. No feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which to look at Christ's compassion to the world. Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good. And yours are the hands with which he is to bless us now." St. Theresa's prayer. This is what it means to be empowered by the Spirit. The ascension then is not a doctrine to be puzzled through in our minds and proved with a data set, but rather is to be embodied in our daily living, like the script of a great play leaps to life when performed by capable actors.

Today we will celebrate communion, the Lord's Supper. It is appropriate that we do so on Ascension Sunday. The bread that we share truly is the "body of Christ, the bread of heaven." When we partake of that bread of heaven we claim the reality that our own very human lives, and the fragile world in which we live, have been "taken up," into the very heart of God, and the bread and wine become tangible expressions of God's Spirit, giving us the strength to be the Body of Christ in the world around us.

Some years ago, our incoming Dean of the Chapel, Sam Wells, was serving a small church in a rather notoriously marginalized and rough and tumble neighborhood in England. One Sunday morning, just as Sam was saying the prayers of consecration over the communion bread, a gang of seven teenagers burst through the front door and strode to the altar, making threats, intent on causing trouble. Sam put the bread down and said to the boys, "behind you, you will see a small group of people who are here to do the most important thing in their lives. I hope it may become so one day in your life. But for now, I suggest you wait outside until we've finished, and then we'll have a chat about what things are really important and how we learn to do them." Much to Sam's amazement, the gang of boys listened. And after the service, Sam and his parishioners had a conversation with the boys, about what things matter, how to treat oneself, other people, and whom to trust.

I don't know about you, but when I hear that story, I think, that is what it looks like to be the Body of Christ, when Christians are empowered by the Spirit of the one who has ascended to be Lord of all. Amen.