

Psalm 139:  
Acts 1: 1-11  
John 16: 16-24

Now What?  
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I have spoken before from the pulpit about my puzzlement – and sometimes exasperation - with people who read every bit of the Bible literally. Sometimes these are people who read all the Bible stories and believe them absolutely literally. Sometimes these are people who read them and turn away from the Scriptures and their faith because they **cannot** believe them absolutely literally. I want to say, “Have you never read love poetry? Have you never sung a song about a beautiful feeling?” If you have, then you know about the richness of language and image of metaphor, and how impoverished we would be without it. Did Romeo actually watch Juliet teaching the torches to burn more brightly? I don’t think so, but I am glad that Shakespeare decided to write that line.

Today is sometimes called Ascension Sunday. It falls between the greater holidays of Easter and Pentecost, and we mark the departure of the risen Christ from his circle of friends. This is vividly described, but only in the Gospel of Luke and its sequel, the Book of Acts. Luke is setting the stage for Pentecost, and in order for the Holy Spirit to come to the band of followers, Jesus has to leave. The story of the Ascension is one of those that tests credulity, especially for modern people. The whole ancient idea that Jesus went “up” to heaven does not fit modern thinking any more, now that we have been to and seen that “up.” I have heard that the famous Bishop Spong had a conversation with Carl Sagan, the astronomer. Spong reported Sagan as saying, “If Jesus ascended into the sky and traveled at the speed of light, then he has not yet escaped our galaxy.” There’s literalism for you.

Speaking of literal representations of religious things, I read another anecdote about the celebration of Ascension Day at a seminary. It was a special service and everyone gathered in robes and regalia to honor the day. The service ended and those assembled processed out of the chapel singing some grand Ascension hymn amid clouds of incense. They did not know that one of the students had decided to honor the day by taking a life-size crèche figure (which was plastic and hollow) and stuffing it with rocket fireworks. As the solemn procession marched into the courtyard, the student lit the fuse and sent the statue soaring up out of the shrubbery through a wonderful cloud of smoke and sparks. It buzzed over the terrified congregation and ended up taking a nosedive onto the roof of a nearby building, where, luckily, the rocket sputtered out. The student explained that this was just a way to demonstrate his faith in the ascension, but that did not fly, so to speak, with the seminary leaders.

When people believed that creation had a certain layered shape, with heaven in the dome that appeared to be their heads, and earth the flat disc they stood on, how would someone leave the world of everyday human life and join God? They would have to leave – perhaps as Elijah did, going upward in a fiery chariot. It just made sense to them in a way that it cannot for us.

Still, the idea of someone or something flying upward – we like that. We like up. Up is good. Down is bad. This framework or orientation pervades so much of our language and thinking. We feel upbeat or downcast. We look up at someone when we admire him or her and look down at

them when we despise them. We talk about mountaintop experiences and valleys of despair. I could go on and on.

And so the Gospel writer Luke (who is the author of Acts and the only Gospel writer to describe the Ascension) wants to explain how Jesus could interact with his disciples after the resurrection, and why he is no longer walking around. He left to be with God. That way, up. The disciples are left gazing up, because they are definitely down. In spite of all the inspiring words and teachable moments, in spite of the amazing events of the last few months, you can imagine them thinking, “Now what?”

Then we get the two men in white robes suddenly appearing and speaking. They are suspiciously like the two men in white robes who made the Easter announcement with a question, “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” The Ascension is marked by them asking another question of the awestruck disciples: “Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” In other words, your job is not to be spectators of this event; you have better things to do.

This whole story, and the many stories on which it relies, like Elijah leaving on a fiery chariot at the end of his life, can be taken literally. Or it can be read as a way to ask, “What now?” and listen for an answer. These are stories about important transitions, about loss and renewal, about hope and possibility. And there are so many ways to describe and reflect on those things. In the reading from the Gospel of John, we have another take on transition. Jesus is speaking just before his arrest (he speaks at great length on this occasion in the Gospel of John) and tells his confused disciples that he is “going to the Father” and that in a little while they will not see him, and then they **will** see him. Just in case you found that reading a little confusing and circular, don’t worry. The disciples were also completely baffled. Instead of talking about up and down, Jesus talks about seeing and not seeing. Once again, I don’t think that we are in the realm of literal interpretation here. Jesus speaks of their spiritual suffering as a kind of childbirth (he was speaking to a bunch of men, so we know he was speaking metaphorically), when labor pains are replaced by the joy of welcoming a new person into the world. “Now what?” Jesus would say: struggle, and joy.

I have been present at a number of departures, when a person died, when they took leave of this world. I remember being with my father. There was no visible ascension, no traveling upward. It was all rather prosaic, not poetic. Rooted in a room, him in a bed, we were earthbound. Something left the room when he died; maybe it went up – I didn’t see it. The struggle was over and he was gone, and we did not see him anymore. And then I did. I saw him in acts of compassion in people around me. I saw him every spring in the blooming forsythia bush that was given to me after his death by the Mission Committee of this church. I saw him in my children, whenever they did something he would be proud of or amused by. I saw him in my son when he was arrested in a demonstration, confronting racial injustice...and in my response of concern, pride and exasperation. When my father died, there was definitely a period when we wanted to stare into the skies, looking after him, in confusion and pain, wondering, “Now what?” He was literally gone, he was literally not here. But when we turned back to our lives in the world, I could – and can - feel him blessing me every day.

We talk about the Ascension of Christ as a prelude to the gift of the Holy Spirit, and we know for sure that Jesus is no longer present as a particular human being who takes up space in a particular time. This leads us to claim by faith that Christ is now more abundantly present than ever before. Not present as a Spirit hovering “up there,” a ghost with no form. We say that Christ is

present as the worshipping and serving body of Christian believers. We say that the Spirit of Christ allows the church to become what Jesus of Nazareth was, at one time. We say that the Ascension makes the work of Jesus more tangible for us, today, right now.

One of the Celtic prayers from the Abbey of Iona uses the phrase, “Christ has ascended into heaven to be everywhere present.” Not to leave us behind as he goes off to enjoy some distant heaven, but to fill the heaven that is all around us, so that as the psalmist put it, If we take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there we find we are still in God’s hands.

So, now what, here, this morning? We could just stare upwards for a while. We could be spectators, with eyes lifted up. Or we could be listeners, and hear what was asked, or, indeed predicted. “You will receive power ... and you will be my witnesses.” I invite you to ponder and share what that power looks like in this particular body: where does the fizz or surprise of spiritual energy make itself felt? And I invite you to ponder that word, “witness.” It gets thrown around a lot, as in a witness in court, or as someone who tries to persuade others to believe in their faith. Our English word witness comes from a root that means knowledge. Merriam-Webster tells us that a witness is a person who is present at an event and can say that it happened; one who has personal knowledge of something. I cannot say that I stood with the disciples and literally saw Jesus’ feet disappear into the clouds. I cannot even say that such an image is particularly compelling to me – I have no desire to re-create the event with statues and fireworks. But I do have personal knowledge of the body of Christ acting with power and compassion and justice in the world, and I can at least speak of that. And “Now what?” I can ask. How will we re-create the real event of the Spirit of Jesus becoming everywhere present?

Next week, we celebrate the enthusiasm and power of Pentecost. This week, we are still waiting to discover what it’s all about. We are in between, doing the best we can not to look for the living among the dead, doing the best we can to stop looking up at the heavens at disappearing feet, doing the best we can to stay focused and get the work done. But as we leave the place of wonder and worship, we know that there is a way ahead of us. Look and listen with your heart. Someone or something will speak to you and show you what’s next. Amen.