

Acts 1: 1-14  
I Peter 4: 7-11  
John 17: 1-11

Waiting for the Promise  
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Airports have a ‘departures’ area at the gates and an ‘arrivals’ area, often with swinging doors. Here people wait to leave, or wait for someone to arrive; we see farewells and greetings, the emotions of transitions, the faces of those waiting, whether bored, expectant, excited, happy, or sad. “What’s next?” we wonder. It is a spatial gateway that illustrates so much of our human condition.

This time of year always has arrivals and departures as well. People often move during June, leases are up, graduations happen, young people mark a passage. In this time we see farewells and greetings, the emotions of transition, the faces of those waiting, whether bored, expectant, excited, happy or sad. “What’s next?” we wonder. It is a temporal gateway that illustrates so much of the human journey.

I mention these scenes of arrival and departure because today is Ascension Sunday, when we read the account from the Book of Acts about the disciples’ final glimpse of Jesus. Of all of the stories and teachings about Jesus that we learn, this one seems the hardest to accept at face value. OK, we get it: a special birth, a humble upbringing, a few years of ministry. He did a lot of walking, a lot of teaching, a lot of forgiving and healing. He ate a lot of meals with the wrong people. He wept. He was arrested and executed. He rose from the dead. Even the resurrection is something we can relate to: we have had Easter experiences of new life coming out of desolation, joy coming out of sorrow. But this ascension business, this image of Jesus floating up into a cloud and going to God, is hard to picture. It belongs so much to an ancient worldview of heaven as up there somewhere, if you just go high enough; earth solid and flat; and hell underneath somewhere, if you just go low enough. It belongs to curious paintings we have seen of Jesus floating with billowing robes, glowing, with eyes cast upward, while a cloud waits to receive him. Some of the old pictures just show the disciples looking up at two feet sticking out of a cloud, all that’s left of the earthly Jesus. Some even have two footprints where Jesus used to be standing. That’s one way to think of his departure, but to my mind it is more of a whimsical fantasy than a solid fact.

Speaking of whimsical fantasies, we also get an admonition here – one of several in the Gospels – from Jesus about not trying to guess the moment of his return or God’s schedule for an ultimate resolution. Sometimes we hear predictions about the “end times” from people who read the Bible literally. And I wonder: why don’t they read Jesus’ words *here* more literally?

There is no doubt, though, that there was a departure, and that later, there was an arrival of divine power in a different form. We might do better to try to understand what this story says about Jesus and his ministry. If we give up trying to make sense of the Ascension in a physical way, we can hear the good news about the gift that Jesus was to his followers and to us. When Scripture speaks of the Ascension, it is a story of the last moment of Jesus’ earthly ministry. Those feet would never again touch the ground, or be washed at someone’s home, or walk the dusty roads of Galilee and Jerusalem. It was an ending: no more companionship with the disciples, no more resurrection appearances. But... it promises us a beginning.

In the church year, we celebrate the moments of arrival, the beginnings in Jesus' life: Advent, Christmas, the Baptism of Christ, and Palm Sunday, Easter. Paradoxically, we also celebrate his departure: Ash Wednesday, when we speak of his journey into the desert, Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, when we speak of his death, and today, when we speak of his reunion with his divine source. Each of these departures includes a promise of something more.

These markings of passage or transition are important not just as historical markers or opportunities for beautiful liturgies and music. They help us to understand the challenges and rewards and possibilities in following in the footsteps of Jesus. When we read about the Ascension, we look backward to Jesus' ministry on earth, and then forward to what we can do today. What we are asked **not** to do is to stand there looking at the feet disappearing into a cloud. "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up into heaven?" ask the men in white robes. Get going, in other words. There is a problem with gazing up to heaven: we can't see the person standing right next to us.

Because the physical Jesus is no longer in this world, the opportunities for action and service and justice expand. Those disciples left the hilltop and went back into the city. They got together with other disciples, including the women, and engaged in a time of prayer and preparation. They had been promised power, the power to witness. Next week, on Pentecost Sunday, we will read about what happened next. Another arrival.

In the rather convoluted, or circular, or spiral passage from John's Gospel, we have another departure speech, in which Jesus prays a prayer for the comfort of his disciples. It is obviously a prayer meant to be overheard. "Now I am no longer in the world," he says, anticipating the painful separation. "But they are in the world...protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one." I read this as comfort, but comfort with a dual purpose. There is the natural distress and anxiety of any separation, as they all prepare to say goodbye. But with the promise of glory and the plea for protection comes an even greater challenge: can they find unity once the unifying presence and force and charisma of Jesus has departed? I can imagine that this is much like parents leaving on a trip, hope that their children won't squabble themselves into violence. Instead of turning to parents for mediation in each difficulty, the children will have to work it out. There is some work to do here. Stop gazing up at heaven. Jesus is departing. You are going to need the protection and the power that will be arriving.

With our minds at rest about the promise of our ultimate union with the love of God as a kind of glory, we look around us with the eyes of Jesus, the insight given by his ministry. We see neighbors in need of a healing touch, we see aspects of our own lives that need healing. We see the importance of forgiveness in human relationships. We see the lack of unity in congregations. With those eyes, we see the ways that those in power manipulate systems to stay in control, and who suffers from that manipulation. We see the many ways that our broken world needs repair.

We also take a new look at one another. With joy we realize that all will find their way to glory with God. With joy we recognize the gifts of our neighbors: gifts that are cultivated and multiplied within a vibrant faith community. Jesus ascended into heaven, so that we could look around and see him everywhere reflected in loving actions and words. This is the promise...so what are we waiting for?

We might take a moment to ponder the word “unity” here. I think of this partly because Memorial Day is tomorrow. Recently I heard a sermon in which the pastor described taking a survey from his congregation: should mention of Memorial Day be made in a Sunday sermon and worship service or not? He got a lot of responses. One person said that one should always preach about fallen soldiers. Another said that you should never preach about fallen soldiers. Another, an injured and decorated Viet Nam veteran, said that on the Sunday before Memorial Day, soldiers from the different branches of the military should process, all should recite the Pledge of Allegiance, and then sing the National Anthem. This had to happen, even if the Gospel was not preached. Another, an injured and decorated WWII vet, said that it was good thing to honor our soldiers, but that’s a civic thing: it should happen in the community outside the church. In worship, the Gospel had to be preached at all costs. Other replies referred to the United States as having a special role in God’s plan: American exceptionalism. It seems that the disciples had a their own version of this when they asked about the restoration of the Kingdom of Israel. When Jesus asked God to protect his followers in his name, maybe he meant, “Protect them from each other, once I am not there to be the referee.”

Somehow, though, Jesus left them waiting for that promise of the Father – the promise of power, understanding, compassion, and unity. Jesus left them so that they could discover the potential in human community. What trust is exhibited in allowing us to discover this! Often is seems to be a misplaced trust, a misspoken promise. But once in a while, as we wait and work together, we really do remember Christ’s ministry and his hopes for us. In each departure and arrival of human experience, Jesus goes before us, beckoning us not up to the clouds, but to a deeper engagement with living. That is the promise. That is the gift. That is the mystery. That is the task before us.

Five hundred years ago, St. Theresa of Avila wrote a prayer that speaks to me of the ascension moment:

Lord Christ,

You have no body on earth but ours,

No hands but ours,

No feet but ours.

Ours are the eyes through which your compassion must look out on the world.

Ours are the feet by which you may still go about doing good.

Ours are the hands with which you bless people now.

Bless our minds and our bodies,

That we may be a blessing to others.

Amen.