

A Sermon for the Seventh Sunday of Easter, 2014
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Alleluia! Christ is risen!

And, we remember today, is rising still. The Feast of the Ascension was a couple of days ago, but we always read the story of Jesus' ascension on the Sunday following as well, on the last Sunday of Eastertide. The Feast of the Ascension is a strange holiday, I think, just as the biblical stories we tell on this day are strange stories. Jesus, who has been walking the earth for forty days after his resurrection, gives some last-minute instructions to his friends and then disappears in a nimbus of glory, leaving his followers to gape and to wait for further developments.

If the story reminds you of some other stories you know, that is as it should be. The cloud of glory was there at the Transfiguration. The angels asking why the disciples are looking for Jesus in the wrong direction remind us of the angels at the empty tomb who asked why Jesus' friends were looking for the living among the dead. You may even be reminded of the Christmas story, where angels also redirect people toward where Jesus may be found.

And the parallels between those stories point us to a larger truth – they are all in some way stories about that most vexing of questions for Christians: just who or what is this Jesus whom we follow?

Incarnation – the belief that God became human, became one of us in the person of Jesus, has been central to Christianity since we decided that’s what God was doing. The stories of Jesus’ birth, transfiguration, death, and ascension are the main events in Jesus life that tell us that this is so. The Ascension was particularly important to the early church as it worked out the theology of incarnation, because it, in its strange, other-worldly way, affirms that Jesus still had an actual body after the resurrection – if not, there would have been nothing to ascend.

But I still find it a troubling story, not so much because of the supernatural element, but because it is so three-dimensional. God and heaven, and now Jesus, are clearly located above us. It is this “up-ness” that I have difficulties with. In Jesus’ day, in a world understood to be hanging in the ether by an invisible chain, and protected from the chaos of the waters and of the darkness by a celestial dome, “up” made sense. But in our day, when the abstraction of “the heavens” has been replaced by the concrete reality of “outer space,” “up” doesn’t do much to clarify our position in relation to an omnipresent God or a long-awaited Jesus.

And even as a metaphor, ascending doesn’t necessarily teach us much. Who’s to say that the stairway to heaven doesn’t lead down – down to the aid of the least among us; the lowly, the underprivileged, the downtrodden, the downcast, the downhearted?

At the very least, the angel tells us one true thing – that if we are looking to the heavens to find Jesus, we are looking in the wrong direction.

Jesus seems to hammer on one point as he prepares his followers for the world they must live in and witness to after his departure. And that point is that he must go away in order for the disciples to do the work they are being sent to do. He's quite adamant about this – these things *cannot* be accomplished unless he goes away.

We have no definitive answers about why that should be true. If divine purpose is mysterious to us, then divine reason is utterly opaque. But here's a thought.

Perhaps, because of that incarnation business, Jesus' very real, human body that was the intersection between God and creation was too small and frail to accomplish God's purpose. Perhaps, in order to accomplish the reign of God, Jesus needed more space, a longer arm, a bigger body. Perhaps, in order to heal the sick and free the captives and feed the hungry and bring about love's victory, Jesus' body needed to become the body of Christ.

If that's the case, then Jesus' final admonition, to be Jesus' witnesses to the ends of the earth makes an urgent, passionate kind of sense. Telling the world, and showing it in action, that God's love and care extend to every human being in every place not only builds up the body of Christ so that Jesus' embrace becomes all-encompassing, at the same time it accomplishes the reign of God, bringing everyone into that embrace.

Neat, huh? And inspiring, I hope. Because every one of you is needed to make it happen. And I don't think it's particularly important for you to go out and tell the world that God loves them; that God intends for them to be free and whole and held in the arms of love. What matters is that we, the body of Christ, we, who together incarnate the spirit of God, love and free and heal and embrace the world. The old song falls short of the remarkable truth – they will not only know that we are Christians by our love, they will know that God loves them by our love.

This is the essence of our faith in action. How will humankind know that God is generous if we are not generous? How will humankind know that God is with them if we are not with them? How will humankind know that God loves them if we do not love them?

And if we are the generous, present, and loving people who do bear witness to God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit by our actions, then we won't have to stare at the sky to try to see Jesus. All we will have to do is look around.

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