

The Seventh Sunday of Easter: the Sunday after Ascension Day
Acts 1:6-14; Psalm 68:1-10, 33-36; 1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11; John 17:1-11

May 3, 2008

“Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up into heaven?” Or, as we might have asked the early astronauts who orbited the earth and reported back that they had not seen God there, “Did you *really* think that you would see God somewhere out in space, sitting on a star, perhaps?”

The Ascension of the risen Jesus, “lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight,” *is* a strange event. Even to the disciples, who had experienced the very real physical presence of the risen Jesus—crucified, dead and buried—and even though three of them, Peter, James and John, had seen and heard Moses and Elijah on the mountain talking with Jesus about his departure that he was to accomplish in Jerusalem (Lk 9:30-31), surely this going up, disappearing from their sight, was a surprise, to say the least. *We* would be surprised to hear that they *hadn't* stood “gazing up into heaven,” but had just walked away. “Jolly good! That’s that. There he went, just as he said. Time for tea.”

But still, they couldn’t stand there forever, staring up in wonder. Suddenly, there were the two men in white robes, come to give them a nudge to get on with it. “This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” It’s not theirs or ours to know the time or periods the Father has set for that. And the way to prepare is not to keep watch at the spot where he was last seen, until he comes.

Some advice given to runners who want to avoid joint injury might be helpful here: Stay close to the ground. Think *forward*, not up. While the Ascension might capture our imaginations, draw us off into some fascinating questions, the real action and meaning weren’t in his going up, but in what would happen in and among the disciples, on the ground, going forward.

Not gazing up, dreaming about pie in the sky when you die.. Not looking back, longing for a long-gone monarchy, the kingdom of David, or of the good old days with Jesus. But grounded in this world and this life, moving forward in the power and hope of what the Holy Spirit is bringing to life, here and now.

On this day, however the Spirit is at work in and among us (and the Spirit is at work in and among us), the readings invite us to remember what it is like to be in a time of waiting and anticipation, between Promise and Fulfillment, as the disciples were in Jerusalem, between Jesus’ Ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

We know from the author of Luke and Acts, that the time was ten days; that Jesus appeared among them for 40 days before he was taken up, and that the Holy Spirit came upon them on the day of Pentecost, a week from today. But before it actually happened, they had no way of knowing, either just when or what would happen. It was definitely a time of uncertainty.

Thinking of our own experiences of anticipation, we might assume that their waiting was an anxious time, or a sad time. That they'd have felt bereft, with Jesus gone, or grown impatient and tired of waiting. There is no evidence of that. They all stayed in the city together, as they were told. They were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, all the disciples, the women, and Mary and Jesus' brothers—his family folded back into the community.

In Luke, where the author also gives an account of the Ascension, they all had returned to the city with great joy, and “stayed constantly in the temple blessing God.” (24:52-53) There are no stories of setting off now, discouraged, for Emmaus, or back home to Galilee.

They waited for the promised gift of the Spirit, but already they had been changed—by the presence and companionship of the risen Jesus. He broke bread with them, had opened their hearts and minds to understand the word, had walked with two of them on the road when they were confused and afraid so that they could not even recognize him.

The power of his resurrection was alive in their memory as they waited. The promise had been given. The one who promised was trustworthy and had all authority in heaven and on earth. They waited with a peaceful spirit and a quiet mind.

The gift of this story opens a door for us into our own grounding, the promise that we, too, can wait in quiet confidence—for the gift of healing, the gift of a child, the return of one we love, the end of hostility among peoples and nations, the bread we need for today.

The reading from John begins and ends before Jesus' departure, but this is before his departure from this life, on the cross. He is at table with the disciples, and coming to the end of his long, last conversation with them. He's not talking directly to them now, but to the Father. We are listening in, with the 11, and generations of his disciples down the centuries, to his prayer.

He already has promised that he will send the Spirit, in John: “I will not leave you orphaned,” he said (14:16-18). And, although *they* will leave *him* alone, he is *not* alone because the Father is with him (16:32). That, in brief, is what he prays for them. His deepest desire is that they, and all future generations, not be alone because the Father is with them, and because they are with each other, in love; one in community, as he and the Father are one.

The community remembered this prayer, or, perhaps over time had come to understand—to know in truth that Jesus came from the Father, and that his living, dying and rising made a tremendous change in this world. Now, with “God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent,” eternal life is experienced here, not somewhere up there; not only out there, on the other side of death and the grave.

Today is the Sunday after Ascension Day, *and* Senior Celebration Sunday. There were some younger members of the congregation—and “senior” and “younger” are *very* relative terms as understood and used here! For example, the “Redeemer Seniors” group, started several years ago, this year changed their name to the “Redeemer Discover and Travel Group.” There were some *relatively* younger members of the congregation who wanted us to honor the among us. And Episcopal Senior Ministries encourages all parishes in the diocese to do so on *this* Sunday in May.

Now, we could do that by recognizing the many ways in which Redeemer’s elders have contributed to this parish, and other parishes they have served in the course of their lives, and continue to serve: through Altar Guild, Vestry, outreach, hospitality, working in the gardens and on the building, stewardship, pastoral care, prayer, worship. All that they have done and continue to do is remarkable, and deserves our thanks.

And yet, important as the works are—*so* important, in fact, that the Church could not have survived without them—it’s not the works but what they reveal that holds our attention and our hearts. In the steadfastness, faithfulness, strength, hope, kindness, humor, compassion, love and joy of these persons, we are not so much seeing “hard-working church people,” as we are seeing the grace and presence of the Holy Spirit. Through their lives lived close to the Father and the Son, in love and fellowship with each other, we can see the life of the age to come breaking into the present. They show us what it is to be a community of love, and have always welcomed all comers of all ages.

And this is so not only of those we are blessed to have with us, but also the ones who have passed fully now into eternal life with the One they love. They are as alive to some of us as if we had been with them only yesterday, this morning even. To others they are only names, faces in old photographs and parish directories. But all of them are bright with the radiance of the Holy Spirit.

Earlier in the Gospel According to John, Jesus told the disciples that he would have to leave them so that the Spirit could come. And that is how it happened. We see the work of the Spirit among us in our honored elders. Not that the Spirit is not present and active in all persons, of all ages. But the presence and action of the Spirit over a lifetime gives a shape and radiance that are recognizable, unmistakable. Though that shape comes in *many* shapes and the radiance is most often quietly and modestly held, they are in themselves a revelation of the face of God.

As we can learn from the story of the disciples’ joyful, confident waiting between Promise and Fulfillment in Acts, we continue to learn volumes from the witness of our elders’ lives. We are all learning, all growing here, old and young and in between.

Irenaeus (the 2nd century saint) famously said, “The glory of God is a human being fully alive.” We thank God for these witnesses to the crucified, risen and ascended Lord, who continue to stay close to the ground, always moving forward ahead of us, on the way.

Blessing of our Elders

We thank you, O God, for the gifts of wisdom and compassion that you have formed and shaped in the Elders of this parish, in the course of lives lived close to your love; and for the continuing fruits of their witness among us and beyond these walls. We ask your blessing on these our elders in the faith, whom we love and honor; give them strength and peace all the days of their lives; and give us grace and wisdom to see your glory as it is revealed in them; through your Son Jesus Christ, our crucified, risen and ascended Lord. Amen.