

Ascension of the Lord (Year C)

Luke 24:44-53

Then he said to them, 'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.' Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.'

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

The time for transition has come again. Just as Spring is coming, albeit slowly, we have transitioned from the season of Lent to the season of Easter. And now, it is time to transition to the season of Pentecost. But before we don the color red and welcome the Spirit among us, we must journey with the disciples to the Ascension of the Lord.

I must admit, the Ascension of the Lord is my least favorite liturgical observance. I think part of that is because I just don't know what to do with it. What does it mean that Jesus is now "up there" and we're "down here?" Why didn't Jesus just stay around forever since, you know, he's resurrected and all? 30-something years seems far too short a time for Jesus to walk the earth. I'm sure if Jesus had stuck around long enough he would have explained in better detail all those parables that still confound us to this day! Why couldn't he just stick around?

And so, these questions haunt me. I imagine I might not be the first person in this room to ask such questions. In fact, these questions were probably lingering in the minds of the disciples as they craned their necks, stretching to see Jesus as long as possible as he rose into the clouds. "What gives?" they must have asked. "It feels like he was *just* resurrected! Why the sudden departure?"

I would think there were probably lumps of grief in the throats of the disciples at first. They loved Jesus. They had been through so much with him. They were still trying to wrap their heads around what this resurrection meant and then he had to go off and leave them again.

I wonder if the disciples felt betrayed. You know, like children whose parents have taken off the training wheels well before they would have liked. Gazing down the hill upon which Jesus had brought them for his departure, they were wondering if they could get down from the precipice without his help, let alone continue their lives.

Which then probably got them thinking, "what do we do now?" To this point, the disciples have followed. And the following, while not always easy, has been at least simple. To this point they've followed a physical human being; you know, something that can feel and see. But now that Jesus has been

ascended to the right hand of the Father; it feels as though they are trying to follow something that is suddenly much less tangible.

However, Luke's account of this story tells us that their mood must have changed; for we are told that they returned to Jerusalem with great joy after worshipping Jesus where he had left them. After they returned to Jerusalem, we are told, they were continually in the temple blessing God.

It would appear that they made it down the mountain just fine without their training wheels. I vaguely remember when my parents first took off my training wheels. Riding a bike is not something that you can think about too much. Rather, it's something you have to feel. Learning how to ride a bike is an exercise in courage and confidence. It is clear that the disciples left the place of Jesus' ascension with both courage and confidence.

I believe they had courage and confidence for two reasons.

First of all, Jesus blessed them as he rose into the heavens. Blessings are important. I remember asking Tricia's parents for their blessing for me to ask her to marry me. I remember walking into their house with a great deal of nervousness but I also remember walking out of the house with elation after I received their blessing. To me, it meant that they supported us, that they had our backs, and that they were to be our advocates.

That is what fell upon the disciples in the Ascension as Jesus blessed them. The disciples knew in that moment that, although Jesus was taking his rightful seat at the right hand of the Father, Jesus supported them, Jesus had their backs, and they had an advocate.

The advocate, known to us as the Holy Spirit, was the second reason I believe they left that place with courage and confidence. The ascending Jesus promised that they would be clothed with power from on high.

Together, with Christ's blessing and the promise of the Holy Spirit, the disciples rode down the hill on their bikes devoid of training wheels knowing what awaited them when they got there. They were confident. They had no fear. They knew that they were blessed and promised.

Sometimes, that is all too easy to forget. So many things in life threaten to cause us to forget that we are blessed, affirmed, and protected by God to do the work that God is calling us to do. We are riding down the street on our bikes without our training wheels but then the bumps and potholes come.

The week before last, I was at a conference north of the City for pastors in their first call. Together, we spent the week worshipping, fellowshiping together, eating together, relaxing together, and spending time in small groups sharing with each other the joys and burdens of ordained ministry. At the end of the week, before we departed to return to our homes, we gathered for a closing worship with communion. We were invited to the table, partaking of communion via intinction, but were given an additional invitation after leaving the communion station. Behind the Table was a net that was hung up on the wall in front of a backdrop of multicolored cloths. Attached to the net were a multitude of origami butterflies, each with an encouraging verse of scripture written on them. We were invited to go and choose a butterfly with the scripture on it and return to our seats, meditating on the words written upon them.

After I pinched off my piece of bread from the loaf and dipped it in the cherry juice and tasted it upon my lips, I stepped up on the platform and chose a random origami butterfly.

As I returned to my seat I read the words upon it. It was from Joshua chapter 1, verse 9: "Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened or dismayed for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."

Without any warning, I found myself crying some gentle tears. "Do not be frightened" the scripture said, "for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go." Listening to the music in my seat as my other colleagues chose their scriptures, I had a very tangible moment where I admitted to myself just how fearful I can be. I fear that my sermons aren't "good enough." I fear that I'm going to screw up as a pastor and hurt someone. I fear that I will be incapable of knowing what to say at the right time. I fear for the finances of the church and the finances of my family. I fear that God hasn't called the right person to the job. I fear about so much because, at times, it feels as though fear is much easier than hope. Hope takes practice. Fear comes all too easily.

As I sat in my chair during communion, I cried silent tears because I had finally admitted to myself how scared I was. I then began to feel silly because I had somehow forgotten that God is with me wherever I go. And, this week, as I prepared for this sermon, I realized that the Ascension is not about Jesus abandoning us. Rather, it is quite the opposite. The Ascension is about a promise. The Ascension is about a promise made to each and every one of us that we are continually receiving Jesus' blessing. The Ascension is about God promising to have our backs and supporting us wherever the Holy Spirit takes us. The Ascension is about Jesus sending us the Holy Spirit that we might have hope and not give into despair.

We all have insecurities. I'm sure the disciples had their fair share. And, if we could all have our way, we would likely never take the training wheels off. After all, it's so much easier with them on. Therefore, sometimes we need a Holy Parent to take off the training wheels and encourage us to explore new places. Sometimes we need a blessing and promise.

As Jesus was lifted up into the clouds, he left the disciples with these words: "you are witnesses of these things." Friends, we are witnesses of these things. So, let us go out and tell "these things." As for me, I'll begin by witnessing to you that sometimes it takes something as simple as a little folded paper butterfly with a verse from the Bible to remind me that God is with me wherever I go.

So friends, be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go. Be not afraid because the Lord has ascended and taken his seat at the right hand of the Creator. Jesus is right where he should be, blessing us with the Holy Spirit who fills our hearts with courage and our lips with praise.

Friends, go be witnesses. When you are tempted by fear, may you witness hope. When you are threatened with pain, may you witness healing. When you are burdened with sadness, may you witness laughter. When you are standing looking for Christ in the clouds, may you witness Christ's Body among you, around you, and beside you.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.