

CHRIST MEMORIAL EPISCOPAL CHURCH, NORTH BROOKFIELD, MA

SERMON—Rev. Dr. Paula Winsor Sage

MAY 28, 2017

ASCENSION SUNDAY

Acts 1:6-14, 1Pet4:12-14;5:6-11, JOHN 17:1-11

GOOD MORNING! Welcome to the celebration for Ascension Sunday!

Ascension Day marks a really important event in our Christian faith, and yet it

really gets too little attention in our church calendar. It comes every year on a

Thursday, 40 days after Easter, but few churches these days even hold a special

service; if it gets celebrated at all, it gets mentioned today, but if you notice your

bulletins, the print-out of our readings is labelled “7 Easter”. The heading of

“Ascension Sunday” above the Order of Service is there because I put it there.

That being said, let us take a minute to consider what it would be like if Jesus’ life

ended with the Resurrection and the Ascension didn’t take place. Why is it

important? The Resurrection would still be a wonderful thing, and we would still

have good reason to shout “Alleluia”. On Good Friday, Jesus died on the cross for

our sins and rose from the dead 3 days later. Jesus’ suffering, and his resurrection,

was part of God’s plan to give us, his children, the opportunity to be forgiven for

our sins and to rise with him and live forever. That is what we celebrate on Easter, and surely it is worth celebrating.

BUT, and there is a “but” coming. I want you to think for another minute about the Gospel readings over the last 6 weeks of the time OF the Easter Season (note it is not called the time AFTER Easter because Easter is not really finished on Easter Sunday). We have had several stories of Jesus appearing to his disciples and others after the resurrection. We see him still around on earth, still strengthening and reassuring and teaching, because his disciples were so frightened and confused by the Good Friday and Easter events that they were scattered and rendered useless for His mission. The risen Christ stayed around on earth after the resurrection for 40 days, appearing here and there, still patiently teaching. Had he not ascended, this is where we would find him today.

But he did not stay around, and instead, we get to Today’s first reading and see his ascension into heaven in front of witnesses. For the last two Sunday’s you have heard readings reporting Jesus’ promise to his disciples which takes place

just before the Ascension we celebrate today. He promises that he is going to prepare a heavenly place for his faithful people and that he will send them another Advocate as his replacement to be with them forever. Think about the difference that those two promises have made in our lives. If Jesus had not ascended to heaven and send the Holy Spirit after his Resurrection, we would have eternal life, but there would be no place in heaven for us. We would be wandering the earth for all eternity, looking for the risen Christ, hoping for Him to appear to help and comfort us. Thanks to Ascension Day, we have the Holy Spirit ready within us always.

So, truly, this part of God's plan, Ascension this week and Pentecost next, which completes the Easter season is vital, something truly worth celebrating. In addition, today's first reading from Acts 1 describing the Ascension gives us, in addition to cause for celebration, something to pay attention to and learn from-- something reinforced by the Gospel we have just heard. Today's Gospel is a section from Jesus' prayer the night before he dies, in the garden the night before

he was arrested--the first Maundy Thursday. He is praying in the garden, a kind of report to his father as he leaves his disciples to be crucified--a prayer which the disciples are overhearing. He tells his father of his love and care for them and his success teaching them, and for asks for 2 things for them. "Holy Father," he says "protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one." Protection and staying together. Jesus prayed this the night before the first time of uncertainty and transition for the disciples, a situation very similar to this time just before his Ascension. In both cases the disciples are forced into a period of uncertainty where their roles are being changed; they are asked to stop following and being students and instead to take up leadership positions and to be to others as Jesus was to them.

But this time, despite the similarities to their first time of uncertainty, there is an important difference! It seems that the time Jesus spent on earth reassuring and guiding them after his Resurrection really helped--and it seems also that His prayer to his Father for their protection and unity was answered. Following

Jesus's arrest and crucifixion, you will remember how the disciples ran away, were paralyzed by fear, scattered to homes and hiding places, and were rendered totally useless in terms of carrying out the mission Jesus had spent three years preparing them for. This time, 40 days later, they saw Jesus leave them again and ascend to heaven. This time they were staring up to heaven together as Jesus ascended, not running away. But, this time two men in white (a.k.a. angels) get their attention (just as 2 others did at the tomb on resurrection morning), and they ask why they are staring. The angels reassure them that Jesus will come back-- as he did the first time. And, this time, the disciples returned to Jerusalem TOGETHER to wait to hear from Jesus again. Luke takes time to name all of them and even other women who were waiting with them, and he tells us that instead of hiding out or going fishing, they constantly devoted themselves to prayer together. What a difference! Their commitment to follow Jesus was unshaken this time. They had learned that they were better together than apart, and they

spent their time seeking comfort and guidance together to learn the next step in their ministry.

What a wonderful lesson this change offers us. Many times in our own lives we go through times of transition and uncertainty. It could be when we are between jobs, or between graduation and what comes next, or after losing a partner or a parent, or at retirement. In these times of transition we often want help faster than it is coming, and uncertainty and doubt and fear are ready to creep in if we let them--they are the Devil's favorite tools to lead us astray and shake our faith. Let us take a lesson from what the disciples learned. Scattered and alone they accomplished nothing; together they saw Jesus' prayer for them answered and found the strength to go on. Together, not alone, they were made ready to receive the Holy Spirit, the Advocate that Jesus promised to send them. Hold on to their example and learn from them!

Whenever you find yourself in any time of transition, it is vital to remember to reach out to others. Remember also that God has promised to help--although it

may be on his schedule and not ours. It may be helpful to remember Peter's words from today's Epistle: It begins, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you." Then Peter reassures us, based on his own experience, that the spirit of God will assist us--in due time. He encourages us to have faith, and, to remember that we are not alone. The conclusion of this epistle holds the promise--the lesson that the disciples learned from their experience with Jesus. It is a lesson which all of us should hang on to for dear life--and remind each other of when we find ourselves in a time of transition: Be patient, Peter says. "After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the power forever and ever." AMEN.