

Year C – 7 Easter – Sunday After the Ascension

Psalm 93

1The Lord is king, he is robed in majesty; the Lord is robed, he is girded with strength. He has established the world; it shall never be moved;

2your throne is established from of old; you are from everlasting.

3The floods have lifted up, O Lord, the floods have lifted up their voice; the floods lift up their roaring.

4More majestic than the thunders of mighty waters, more majestic than the waves of the sea, majestic on high is the Lord!

5Your decrees are very sure; holiness befits your house, O Lord, forevermore.

Acts 1.1-11

1In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning 2until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. 3After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. 4While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; 5for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

6So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" 7He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 8But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." 9When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. 11They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Ephesians 1.15-23

15I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason 16I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. 17I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, 18so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, 19and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. 20God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, 21far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. 22And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, 23which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Luke 24.44-53

44Then 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." 45Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, 46and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, 47and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. 48You are witnesses of these things. 49And 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."

50Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. 51While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. 52And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; 53and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Today's readings provide us with two accounts of the Ascension in Christ into heaven. One of the things I really like about the Gospel narrative is that it often reads like a good thriller. We've read it so many times, either individually or as part of the liturgy, year after year, that it can often become too familiar or "old hat". But think back to when you read or heard the story for the first time – from Incarnation to Pentecost. There are many points where, just when you think you've reached a climax in the story or have it all figured out, there's a sudden twist that takes you to a different place altogether.

It starts with this baby whose birth is foretold and then accompanied by miraculous signs. We read about his youth, where it becomes clear early on that this young lad is not your ordinary boy. Then he just drops out of the scene for about 30 years. We then read about the return and ministry of Jesus, where miracle after miracle, teaching after teaching, and example after example unfold – all pointing us to a new way of life. This new way of life catches on with multitudes, and just when you think "Yeah! This is the living face of God! This guy's going to change the world!" - we betray him, nail him to a tree, and kill him. We go through the shock of the body laid in a tomb, the sadness and the disarray of the apostles. We can imagine the feelings of being adrift and thinking - "now what?". Just when all seems lost – the risen Christ appears! Multiple times, and with new teachings for his followers. And now, just when it is probably finally sinking in that He has actually transcended death and is proof that we can and will, as well – now he's apparently leaving them again! The apostles show that same reaction of "whoa whoa whoa, what are we supposed to do now?". And Christ tells them "just hang on a bit, I'm sending you the gift of the Spirit, and it's going to get even better! Or to quote Arnold - I'll be back".

If I were one of the apostles who had gone through all of this, had ridden the ups and downs, seen unbelievable miracles, had my world rocked, and then left in uncertainty and fear, I'd probably be a basket case about now.

In the midst of all of this, there is one aspect about the Gospel story up to this point – the Ascension of Jesus into heaven, that I often wonder about and that I'd like to explore with you today.

The point is this – Why was it necessary to draw this all out over so many weeks? Why couldn't the point about overcoming death and sin just be made by going straight from the cross to heaven? If the point was to redeem us and empower us to help make the kingdom a reality, then why didn't the Spirit descend on the followers right then and there at Golgotha? Wouldn't that have scared the living heck out of the Roman guards and made quite a point with those who had just condemned him!

Because we are human, I've come to believe that it was absolutely necessary to draw out and emphasize the events from Easter to Pentecost. Something absolutely new and revolutionary in the human experience was happening here. The One Holy Creator God was acting decisively in the course of human history to reconcile all people back to their Creator. Moreover, as seems to be the case throughout Scripture, as God reveals more to us about God, we also learn more about ourselves. I believe that here again, God is also showing us a very important lesson about ourselves. And if we are called to make the journey with Jesus, and if we are called to be active partners in helping to the Kingdom of God a reality on Earth, then it is critical that the apostles, the followers, and also we, really understand what is taking place here.

Now if we look at the track record of the apostles so far, they seem to have a little difficulty in this area. Throughout the life and ministry of Jesus, they always seem like they “just don't quite get it”. In the midst of deep teachings, they ask questions about who will be greatest among their group. In the presence of miracles, such as the Transfiguration, they want to pitch a tent, have a seat, and just groove on the experience. Many times in the reported speech of Jesus, we can sense his exasperation. Interestingly, throughout the Gospels, it is the women that always seem to get it – to comprehend the person of Jesus and the meaning behind the message. So I have this vision of God, deliberately slowing things down, and saying – Now this is really important. Let's just take this one step at a time so that you really get it.

Now, we know from our own experience that emotional memory is often much stronger and impactful than simple cognitive memory or theoretical understanding.

I think that the followers *had* to witness the slow, brutal, and painful death on the cross. They *had* to experience the depth of emotion that ran from the joy of Palm Sunday to the defeat and despair of Good Friday, wondering what on Earth they would do now that their rabbi was gone. They *had* to experience the risen Jesus – several times, over weeks, and in forms or appearances that they not always recognized – in order to fully understand that Christ truly had transcended death as we understand it, and that resurrection into new life is not just a revival of a corpse so that we can pick up where we left off.

And now, at the Ascension, Jesus is showing them that even *these* appearances were not who and what he *really* is. He is returning to the unity of Father, and it is necessary that the followers see this and witness it in slow motion – not just poof here one moment, gone the next, but to have that lingering visual impression of the earthly form of Jesus leaving them.

So what does this have to do with us today? As I mentioned, I believe that one of the beauties of Scripture is that as God is revealed to us, more of our own nature is revealed to us. We gain a better understanding of who and what we really are, and what our Creator intends for us to do. After all, we are created in God's image.

One of the most powerful emotional memories I have is having taken the training wheels off my son's little two-wheeler, giving him those few steps of balance and push, and then letting go. I have the vivid memory of watching him ride off, a little wobbly, down the cul de sac, now on his own. Throughout life, as I watched him drive off on his own after getting his driver license, as we watched him drive off for the first weekend of National Guard duty, and as we watched him leave for college – that visual memory of the little guy on the two wheeler kept coming back as a metaphor for me.

At each stage, I played a certain role in helping to form him, guide him, and protect him. And at each stage as he rode off, both he and I took on new roles, our relationship deepened, and the process repeated itself – all moving him toward becoming the wonderful adult that he is today. My goal, and I truly hope that this has been the outcome, was never to shape him into what I wanted him to be, but to help him discover who he is, what his passions and gifts are, and to help him feel free enough to just be himself and share those God-given gifts with the world.

I think that in a nutshell – that this is the gift of God's relationship with humankind in Scripture, and the gift of Christ. God is painstakingly, step by step, in doses that we can digest and comprehend, and then build upon – not only revealing more of who God is, but helping us to realize just who and what we really are. The message of Christ throughout the Gospel is that if we really understood our true nature and our intimate relationship with each other, with Creation around us, and with God, we would not be afraid, we would not be bound by perceived limitations of this world, we would not be caught up in material concerns, and having been freed from those fears - all things would be possible. In other words, we would be free to help make the Kingdom of God a reality on this earth.

Sufism is the mystical branch of Islam, and there is a Sufi tale that I believe illustrates this well.

A stream, from its source in far-off mountains, passing through every kind and description of countryside, at last reached the sands of the desert. Just as it had crossed every other barrier, the stream tried to cross this one, but it found that as fast as it ran into the sand, its waters disappeared.

It was convinced, however, that its destiny was to cross this desert, and yet there was no way. Now a hidden voice, coming from the desert itself, whispered: “**The wind crosses the desert, and so can the stream.**”

The stream objected that it was dashing itself against the sand, only getting absorbed: that the wind could fly and this was why it could cross a desert.

“By hurtling in your own accustomed way you cannot get across. You will either disappear or become a marsh. You must allow the wind to carry you over to your destination.”

But how could this happen?

“By allowing yourself to be absorbed in the wind.”

This idea was not acceptable to the stream. After all, it had never been absorbed before. It did not want to lose its individuality. And, once having lost it, how was one to know that it could ever be regained?

“The wind,” said the sand, **“performs this function. It takes up water, carries it over the desert, and then lets it fall again. Falling as rain, the water again becomes a river.”**

“How can I know that is true?”

“It is so, and if you do not believe it, you cannot become more than a quagmire, and even that could take many, many years; and it certainly is not the same as a stream.”

“But can I not remain the same stream that I am today?”

“You cannot in either case remain so,” the whisper said. **“Your essential part is carried away and forms a stream again. You are called what you are even today because you do not know which part of you is the essential one.”**

When he heard this, certain echoes began to arise in the thoughts of the stream. dimly, he remembered a state in which he - or some part of him, was it? - had been held in the arms of a wind. He also remembered - or did he? - that this was the real thing, not necessarily the obvious thing to do.

And the stream raised his vapour into the welcoming arms of the wind, which gently and easily bore it upwards and along, letting it fall softly as soon as they reached the roof of a mountain, many, many miles away. And because he had had his doubts, the stream was able to remember and record more strongly in his mind the details of the experience. He reflected, “Yes, now I have learned my true identity.”

Like the stream, we are attached to a notion of self that is rooted in lots of fears, which holds us back from our true potential as children of the Creator, and which holds us back from taking our part in making the Kingdom of God a reality. We are called to let go of that notion, and to let God guide us onward. This is difficult for us. It is frightening. It calls us to trust, to let go of material and emotional comforts, and to step into the unknown. This is what I believe is meant when we talk of first “dying to self”.

The daily needs, pressures, and fears that feed this incorrect image of ourselves sometimes needs a shock so that we can let go. I can recall the moment in my own life when my notion of self was first turned on end. Yes, it's an astronomy story – you knew I couldn't get through a sermon without at least one. I recall when I first studied the Big Bang in physics. This was the moment, some 14-16 billion years ago, when we are fairly certain that the entire universe as we know it was compressed

into one, microscopic singularity. In an event that physicists still struggle to understand, the infinite potential of all that was, all that is, and all that ever will be, came blasting into existence as we know it. Every single atom and element in our universe was contained in that one singularity. Over the eons, material has been recycled through the birth and death of stars, but every single atom in my body, your body, and in all the people and the world around us – were all part of that same singularity. That's when my notion of self first came crashing down. That's when I first saw spiritual truths that had been claimed for thousands of years confirmed in a physical way that my limited understanding needed. In the most real and physical sense – we all are One. We are in the Creator, and the Creator is in us – *all* of us. Truly what I do to the least of us, I do to myself, and I do to my Creator.

In such instances, who we are, or rather who we 'think' we are, will cease to be. Throughout our life, we have encounters with teachers, mentors, parents, and guides – loved ones that impact us, change us and move us into a new time in our lives filled with greater understanding. There will be challenges, there will be setbacks, there will be joys, and there will be pain. But the Gospel promise is that our soul – that which is really us – is eternal, and is safe in the hands of God. This is the journey that Jesus has taken the apostles on. This is the journey that we read about every year in our liturgy. This is the journey that plays out in our own lives.

Next week is the time in our annual cycle that we celebrate Pentecost – the coming of the Spirit that Christ promised, and the next part of the human journey begins. We will encounter a familiar scene of the apostles holed up in a room out of fear, asking “now what do we do”? Our days are often filled with the same question. We get to work, and prioritize our task list – asking now, what should I do? On the weekends, we look at the possible household and yard projects – asking now, what should I do? When we have leisure time and a choice of hobbies – we often ask now, what should I do? How often do we include our faith in that thinking? Do we ever ask, as part of our daily planning – what can I do today that will help make God's love known in the world? What can I do that will allow Christ to live through me? I think that if we truly understood who and what we really are, that this would be the first question on our lips in the morning.

In Scripture we often see the Spirit referred to as the Counselor. I like this image of teacher, helper, advisor, empowerer. If we are open to the gift of Spirit, and trust enough to let go of our preconceptions and fears, God as Spirit will provide the wisdom and the insight, and our path will be made clear.

Just as the Spirit transforms the water in our Baptism, turning it from simple H₂O into an instrument of

Grace, and just as the Spirit in the wind transformed the water in the Sufi story, the Spirit has the power to transform us and turn us into instruments of Grace. The Spirit will help us understand and embrace our true nature, and can transport us to a new place in our lives – where we will be unencumbered by fears, by old understandings of self – and where we will finally be free to take our place helping to make the Kingdom of God a reality. My own prayer for this Pentecost is simply - Lord, let this be the year that the training wheels come off.

Amen.