

May 29, 2022

7th Easter Year C; Ascension Day Observed

Acts 1: 1-11

Psalm 93

Luke 24: 44-53

Acts 1:1-11

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After 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. While 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; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But 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." When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They 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."

"In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

Many years ago, my husband Tim, served a church in Hanover County, outside of Richmond. Beulah Presbyterian Church was located on the Cold

Harbor Battlefield and was attended by many families with long histories in the county. The long histories were fascinating to us and interesting to learn, but they also led to a problem for both Tim and me.

Foks would launch into a story or news of their family, but would leave out crucial pieces of information. Now this was a good sign for our being connected to the church community, because they were forgetting that we were not from Hanover and did not know everyone, but it led to both of us at times being confused after a coffee hour or a potluck.

We would compare notes on the way home from church asking questions like:

Who is Jackie?

Where was the old blue barn?

Today is our last Sunday in the season of Easter. You will notice from the front of your bulletin that we are observing Ascension Day today. Ascension Day occurs 40 days after Easter Sunday and was last Thursday. We could have just ignored it, but this day includes crucial information that we need, but that is often neglected in the Christian story.

Since the beginning of Lent, we have been walking the road to Jerusalem with Jesus; through Holy Week we entered the city with him, and have witnessed the Last Supper, his death on the cross, and the glory of his resurrection.

Through this Easter season we have heard of the appearances of Jesus to his disciples and friends. And next Sunday we will hear of the arrival of the Holy Spirit to the disciples and the beginning, the birth of the early church as they go out and begin to preach.

But if we skip Ascension Day we might wonder where and when did Jesus leave his friends? Did he simply step away, exit stage right?

The ascension of Jesus to heaven is spoken of in both our Acts and Luke readings today.

Jesus takes his friends to a hill outside of Jerusalem. He teaches them one more time, and then tells them their task now is to return to the city and wait “for the promise of the Father.”

They will be waiting to see what their lives will be without Jesus by their side. How will they called now? What will they do? And most of all HOW can they do all of this without Jesus?

Jesus assures them, that “...you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

Then Jesus is lifted up into the clouds and is gone from their sight. They really can't bear it. So they keep looking up into the sky, looking where they last saw him.

Finally, angels appear to get them unstuck. A tap on the shoulder was likely needed to get them to stop looking to the sky, and a question to startle them into moving forward:

“...(W)hy do you stand looking up toward heaven?”

And the angels remind them that Jesus told them the next step, go back to the city and wait, for not too many days. That is all they need to do. We like the disciples can get ourselves all tangled up in the next ten steps to a new path, but all we need to do is the next step. One step at a time when venturing into a new chapter.

So the disciples did finally stop looking in the wrong direction and went back to the city to wait.

We are not good at waiting either. We want to know all the steps in a new venture, when only one step at a time is really possible. This is true in our own lives, and in our life as Whitechapel and Trinity.

We too are in the midst of an uncertain newness. As the churches we have done some new things, like sharing Palm Sunday and Easter, and we have six more services and events that we will tackle together this summer.

We are taking one step at a time with a little change, and then need to wait and see where God directs us.

Last Sunday I told the story of a French Jesuit priest who suffered great loss when his writings, now heralded in Celtic Christianity, were silenced by the Catholic church in the early 20th century. This priest, was known in the story as simply Mr. Tayer.

Though he could no longer publish his writings or speak publicly, he still found joy in the world and conversations to offer God's love and hope to others.

I came across another quote from Mr. Tayer this week and found it speaking to the disciples as they waited after Jesus ascended to heaven, and found it speaking to Whitechapel and Trinity as we do a few new things, and then must wait to see whether there are fruits, and how God calls us further.

Mr. Tayer wrote on "Patient Trust":

"Above all, trust in the slow work of God. We are quite naturally impatient in everything to reach the end without delay. We should like to skip the intermediate stages. We are impatient of being on the way to something unknown, something new. And yet it is the law of all progress that it is made by passing through some stages of instability—and that it may take a very long time.....Only God could say what this new spirit gradually forming in you (us) will be. Give our Lord the benefit of believing that his hand is leading you (us), and accept the anxiety of felling yourself (ourselves) in suspense and incomplete."

On this Ascension Day observed may we yearn for and strive for patient trust in the slow work of God.

Amen.

