

Acts 1:1-11  
Psalm 93  
Ephesians 1:15-23  
Luke 24:44-53

Ascension C  
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island  
June 2, 2019  
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It has been quite a time in the life of this community. There has been such a lot of dying – I’m holding the deaths of eight people and the hearts of the ones who loved them just now. While the eight aren’t all people who are known to our congregation, most of them are. And anyway, when people call our church because they are grieving, because someone they love has died, it doesn’t matter to me whether they’ve been a part of this community. They become a part of this community when they reach out to us. That is one of the gifts of being a parish church... we belong to everyone around us and it is our joy to offer the sacraments, the solace, the teachings, the community and the hospitality of the church to every one of them.

As you would imagine, I’m in the midst of funeral planning with several families right now and I’ve spent a lot of time going over the possible readings for the burial rite. The gospel reading that is most often chosen is from John’s gospel and it has finally dawned on me what a great deal that reading has to do with the Ascension. What happens on Ascension Day and why does it matter? The group of us that gathers for Eucharist on Thursday mornings talked about that last Thursday. Ascension Day never lands on a Sunday because it’s always 40 days after Easter and 40 days after Easter Sunday is always going to be Thursday. But Ascension Day really is profoundly important and foundational to what ultimately we believe as Christians so we’ve transferred the feast to this day so we can open up the scriptures and begin to ponder the meaning of the ascension.

If you ask Christians what the most important tenet of the Christian faith is, most will say either incarnation or resurrection - Christmas or Easter. But whether you fall on the side of incarnation or you fall on the side of resurrection, you’re likely NOT going to fall on the side of the ascension. After all, why would the day our Lord and Savior left us, be a great day for us? Even Jesus, when he spoke of the end of his life on earth, always said he would suffer, die and rise again. He didn’t talk much about ascending to the Father. And when he did<sup>1</sup>, it was very mysterious. Do you remember when he did speak of it? It was Easter morning and Mary Magdalene was alone – well, there were two angels there, but all the other disciples had gone. When Mary finally figured out Jesus wasn’t the gardener, he said to her, ‘Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”’

It’s taken me a long time to make sense out of that bit of scripture. For most of us the meaning of the Ascension is just what the Creeds says – the Ascension lands Jesus at the right hand of the Father from whence he shall judge the living and the dead, and that it somehow completes the exaltation of Jesus and wraps up the incarnation with a glorious, happy ending. Those things are

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<sup>1</sup> John 6:63; 20:17

all true and right and essential to the Christian faith. But I have come to understand something else about the Ascension, something that brings it much closer to home.

That Burial Rite gospel reading I referred to earlier is also from John's gospel. Listen. Jesus said 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.'<sup>2</sup> If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? When Jesus ascended, he went to prepare a place for us.

Last Sunday we heard Jesus say If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father<sup>3</sup>. That's not the best translation – what he was really saying was Since you love me, you'll rejoice because I'm going to the Father. I always thought that had something to do with being willing to be glad that Jesus was returning to the Father because that was the completion of the glorification of Christ and I shouldn't be selfish and wish Jesus was still walking around in the world healing everyone in sight and making miracles everywhere he went. And while I knew I was supposed to be glad Jesus had gone away, I never really could figure out why I was supposed to be glad. No matter how hard I thought about it, I couldn't get it to make sense because who wouldn't want Jesus to still be walking around in the world? But that isn't right. Because Jesus did die, did rise again, did ascend to the Father, did go to make a place for us, we have eternal in the heavens a place just for us.

When Jesus ascended to the Father, he completed the circle of the incarnation and made not just a place, but a way for us to return to the Father. Resurrection means that Jesus is alive forever. There is something about the Ascension that makes a way for us to be alive forever too. This was one of the first things Jesus said when he began his very long goodbye discourse to the disciples. I go to prepare a place for you so that where I am, you may be also. Recognizing what happens in the Ascension also helps us to understand the cross as an act of love rather than the act of a God who had to punish someone for all our sins. You see, if Jesus ascended to the Father to make a place for us and a way for us to be with him in eternal communion, the cross doesn't have to mean he died because we are sinners who deserve to be punished. It doesn't have to mean that Jesus who is without sin and certainly doesn't deserve to be punished, had to die in our place. And it doesn't have to mean that Jesus dying in our place somehow equates with God forgiving us. Jesus preached and offered forgiveness all throughout his life, so surely his death was not the beginning of God forgiving us. When we embrace the fullness of the Ascension, we can begin to see that Jesus' death on the cross wasn't necessary so that God could love us and forgive us. Jesus death on the cross happened because God loves and forgives us. And because God suffers with us and redeems all our suffering too.

God knows there is great suffering when we lose someone we love. I've been talking about that with people a lot lately. Even when someone we love hasn't really been present for a very long

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<sup>2</sup> John 14:1-4

<sup>3</sup> John 14:28

time, lying in the hospital bed still breathing is very different from not being in that bed. Absence has a very strong presence. And the presence of absence has a very big impact on us. It's why, when my own father died, it took us so long to call the people who would take him - would take his body - to the funeral home. Even though he had died, something of him was still present as long as his body remained in his bed. When they took him away, the presence of his absence was palpable. That must have been what the disciples were feeling as Jesus slipped away from them for the second time. They thought they had lost him when he died on the cross. They were so sure of it, in fact, that they never once recognized him when he came to them after that. And here it was happening again – he was there and then gone from their sight. Men of Galilee why do you stand looking up toward heaven? It's just what we talked about last week. Jesus isn't coming to us out of the past, he is coming to us out of the future.

While we believe Jesus ascended into heaven to sit at God's right hand, which is fun to imagine but probably not something we should take literally, and we are beginning to understand that Jesus ascended into heaven to go and make a place for us, we also believe that Jesus is HERE, coming to us again and again. Jesus comes to us in every act of kindness, every gift of mercy, each time we welcome the ones who are not like us, in every offering of love. Those disciples had to have believed that because they didn't drop to their knees weeping when Jesus was gone from their sight. Instead, they returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

We too return to the temple to bless God, both in times of presence and times of absence. We too rejoice and bless our God for the gifts of earthly and eternal life. And no matter who is absent from us, we come here to know God's presence, in the bread, in the wine, and in each other too. Even the ones who have been away from church for a while come back because God feels absent and to be together in this place, in this community, is to know God's presence. Jesus promised to be with us always, and especially when two are three are gathered in his name. It's why those two angels told the disciples to stop looking up and start looking around. My dears, Jesus isn't in the sky, he's right here, alive and present in you and in me. Amen