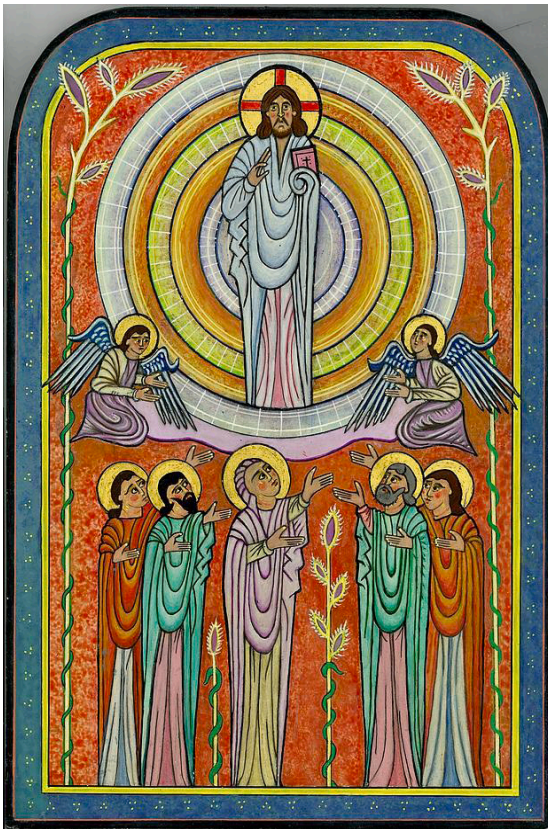


May 21, 2023

The Seventh Sunday of Easter

Acts I

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St. Anne's in-the-Fields Episcopal Church



But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses...

The British novelist Julian Barnes might have been speaking for more people than he realized when he said, "I don't believe in God. But I do miss him."

Plenty of people look around at the world and conclude that this is a world without God. It's a world where children are dying in poverty of preventable disease, people are drowning in the sea trying to escape from war and tyranny. It's a world where the human heart never seems to be able to grow up enough to know that the most beautiful things in life aren't things, and so we crush one another and our environment in the pursuit of plunderable resources and competitive consumption and take pride in big things we can launch and destroy everything with – the final proof of how great we are. Any Christian with a shred of intelligence will surely understand why so many are driven to say: "It all feels like a world without God." And perhaps, in secret, for much of the time, that is how it feels for them too.

Turns out that many experiences of faith are constructed around experiences of absence. "If you had been here," says Martha to Jesus, "my brother would not have died." Later there is his own cry from the cross as Jesus dies with the question of the psalms on his lips: "My God, why have you forsaken me?" Even Easter morning is focused on an empty space and a message that he is "not here." And, on the feast of Ascension (that's today!), there is the image of the apostles staring at the sky, seeing Jesus disappear. It used to be a tradition that on Ascension Sunday the Easter candle was snuffed out, a rather final statement about how the Ascension might be interpreted – it was nice while it lasted but it's over, he's gone now.

Maybe this is one reason why Ascension is often forgotten and not celebrated quite so readily as other feasts: who wants to celebrate being left behind? Who wants a day to remind us of God's absence?

But what those first apostles learned, we are told, is that, yes, they did have to get used to living in the world without Jesus – or at least, living in a world without the Jesus they have known. It's almost as if Christ is saying, "It's going to be different. Don't expect to see me around in the old way." According to John's Gospel, Jesus has already told them that it's actually better for them if he goes away. In the Gospel of Luke, it tells us that when he withdrew, they were blessed. In Acts we hear, his absence makes way for a presence. You will be my witnesses.

Reflecting on the Ascension this past week reminded me of a little experiment of observation my high school physics teacher had us do in lab one day. Mr. Morton said, "I want you to take 1 minute and make a list of as many objects in this room that you see." Loving any sort of

competition, I was fast to work noticing glass beakers, scales, magnets, a computer and microscope. I pushed past the obvious and noticed the multimeter and the voltmeter, the prisms, the wave motion and resonance apparatuses. After the minute was up, we all read out and compared our lists. I stood proud as my list went above and beyond mentioning cabinets and sinks; I knew the names of the advanced stuff. And that's when Mr. Morton made the observation: "I noticed that no one here mentioned the most obvious thing in the room: light." "Hey, light isn't an object though," one of us belted out. Mr. Morton had that twinkle in his eye of a teacher who has his class on a tee and is about to smack their still-forming minds out of the park, "It is an object, but in a different kind of way. It's the massless object in relation to you and your retina that illuminates all other objects."

When Jesus was among his disciples, he was an object in their world. Someone they could reach out to, talk to, laugh with; he was, to put it plainly, one of the guys. They wanted him to stay with them, of course, so they clung to him, even protected him when necessary. But what they had to learn is that we are liable to hold on to what we can see and understand so as to make ourselves feel safe. When Jesus is just there, part of the furniture, an object in the world, an item on a list we can keep, the risk is he will become too familiar, domesticated, a pale, worn-out image of us. Then we can't go anywhere with him. We must learn to live on our own two feet, with the mess of our own hearts and mistakes – and just here, not to simply look for Jesus, but to look at our lives through his light. To see with his eyes. He tells them as he leaves: "You are my witnesses now, my messengers," and then two men appear in white robes and chivvy them along. "What are you standing here for then? You heard what he said. There's work to do, a world to be woken up."

I want to introduce you to someone who practices, what we might call, a spirituality of the Ascension. Sr. Carole was an absolute whirlwind of a person. She was the chair of the music school at Duquesne University, and when she wasn't there, or teaching piano to one of her countless students, she was driving down to Charlestown, WV, where she was the director of the West Virginia Institute of Spirituality. And when she wasn't directing mentees, or teaching classes to clergy like me, Sr. Carole, who was pushing 80 herself was caring for two of the older sisters in the order. Needless to say, there was more voltage and energy in Sr. Carole's presence than Gillette Stadium this past Friday night. *Sister, how do you do it? How do you find time and energy for it all? What supplements are you taking, Sister?* I asked her point blank one day what her prayer life was like: did she pray for strength, for energy, for patience? She said to me, "Oh, Garrett, I start each day and pray that I'd see each person not with Carole's eyes, but with Christ's. That's the highest form of love I know. Not just seeing the Beloved,"
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but trying to see what the Beloved sees, how he sees, what he sees.” So obvious, so simple, so easy to forget – like light itself. She told me how that was her prayer to start each day, and then at the end of the day, over a cup of tea, she’d review how she did, who she saw with Christ’s eyes. She would look at her own day, her own self with that higher vision.

You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Go now and see the world through my eyes, love the world through my compassion, stand up for the forgotten with my courage, challenge evil with my anger, make this world through my justice. As he leaves his disciples, he in effect says to them: I am not going anywhere, I’m going everywhere. I’m going with you, all the way, in you to your deepest self. There will be times when you won’t see me, but its because I must now become the air you breathe, the light you see by, and never an object to pin down – on wood or in mind.

It’s scary. But as he challenges us to live alone, he promises to send some comfort – Spirit, holy, beautiful, just and freeing. And for always.

Jesus hasn’t gone away but has gone deeper into the heart of our reality. He is more than a visible friend, he is now the center of life, the source of energy and of trust, the light in whom we see light. And if people say that this is a world without God, Christians don’t say, “Oh it’s really not so bad” or point to the good bits to cover up the rest. Christians aren’t forcing the smile of optimism onto a suffering world. They simply work harder, as he did, in this fractured world to bring hope in the pain we all share in from time to time and which we honestly so often don’t understand. Christians pray and speak and listen and behave to bring to light the energy and love at the heart of all things, especially when it feels far away or just a cruel dream. But we know, deep down, that love is the only strength, the only integrity, the only hope, and that hurt will often be its cost.

And yet, here this Sunday, when we remember the Ascension of Jesus, may we do more than remember it. May we hear the Risen and Ascended Lord lean close to us with an invitation:

Lean on me, trust me. See the world through my eyes. I want to be the light of your vision. The colors you see in the world. I want to be in the tears that call you to action, and in the landscapes that call you to adoration. I want you to see my life in the green on the trees, and the blooming of spring; I want you to see my affection in the smiles that carry you through the day; my joy in your laughter, my peace in your rest, my courage in your protest. Don’t just look for me. Look with me. Look through me. To a world that misses God, might you be the courageous and gentle reminder of my light illuminating and suffusing all things?