

Ascension Day
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Up, Up and Away

I love celebrations, birthdays, anniversaries, graduations, and as a nation, this weekend we celebrate Memorial Day in honor of those who gave their lives for the freedom we enjoy. Marking mankind's achievements happens all over the world to celebrate our human ingenuity. Now think about our Christian celebrations. We celebrate some extraordinary events—unimaginable, humanly impossible acts of God in the world. Today is no exception, as it is the day when Jesus lifted up his arms, blessed the disciples, and was taken up into heaven—unimaginable. In our ordinary world, God has done extraordinary things.

In many of our churches, there is a Paschal candle, which is first lit and kept burning throughout the Easter season, as a sign of Christ's risen life, present among us. Back in the day, it was traditional to extinguish the Paschal candle on Ascension Day, making the Easter season last forty days. Jesus rose from the dead, walked among us, and then He ascends and is no longer with us. This left us with an emptiness while we waited for the Holy Spirit to come at Pentecost, and the Spirit was seen as a stand-in for Jesus. Today, however more ancient and arguably a more profound meaning of Jesus' ascension has emerged, and I am glad because I think it honors the roll of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The resurrection, ascension, and descent of the Holy Spirit are understood as pieces of a larger picture.

With God there is no looking back—Jesus has not “gone away,” so the Paschal candle will still burn this Sunday, and we will greet each other with “Alleluia! Christ is risen!” Just as the Resurrection does not turn the clock back to the way things were before Jesus died, so too, the Ascension does not turn it back to the way things were before he was born. God's movement, the Jesus movement as Bp. Curry would say, is always forward.

Let's look at what happened today in the Gospel. (close your eyes) Imagine you were there with them, having walked with Jesus throughout his ministry, remember the miracles you witnessed, and the loving acceptance Jesus showed to the people you met. The last few months however, have been emotionally and spiritually draining. We went from riding high into Jerusalem shouting, “Hosanna in the highest,” to the self-realization that no matter how deep our faith runs, we are human, and capable of denying Jesus -- making His crucifixion sting more deeply. And then, back to the high felt when Jesus is discovered alive, resurrected from the dead.

Now, we are gathered on the Mount of Olives. Standing here with Jesus, even knowing what comes next, I am not sure any of us could imagine the unbelievable event we are about to witness. Jesus spoke to them saying, “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. “Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures...”

Did you catch that? “Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures...” That line made me stop and take a hard look at the whole Gospel. Do you mean to tell me that for the last three years, Jesus could have simply “opened the minds” of the disciples to understand, and eliminated all the confusion and frustration? The ability to instantly enable people to comprehend the complexity of our relationship to God would have come in handy, multiple times during His ministry! Seriously, if Jesus had done this from the start, the Gospel could have been one paragraph long: Jesus was born and grew up. At the wedding at Cana, Jesus performed his first miracle. People had questions, so he opened their minds to

understand the scriptures. He told us all to love God and each other. They immediately took him to the Romans, and He was crucified, died and was buried. He rose from the dead, He ascended into heaven, and He will come again to judge the living and the dead. The end! I am not sure that Gospel would stand the test of time, as it is not sustainable.

Jesus needed to lead by example. He needed to have fully-human and relatable experiences with the people—with us. People needed to participate in changing their ways and learning to love each other—experience is our best teacher. We need to see ourselves in the story, recognize our behavior, and feel the love, joy, hope, brokenness, healing, and redemption of Jesus' love for ourselves. People value what they work to achieve. Jesus calls us to participate in sharing the God's love and the message of salvation with the whole world. And, all of us, are members of the priesthood of all people, and called to spread the Gospel, through our words and our actions.

The disciples' minds were open. So, when Jesus ascended into heaven, they rejoiced. They understood, they trusted their eyes, they trusted what had been revealed to them, and they trusted Jesus. They were given the gifts of the Spirit, and they proclaimed repentance and forgiveness, beginning from Jerusalem.

What about us? Do we believe the Gospel? Do we trust the account of the ascension of Jesus, and did this mind opening, extraordinary event take place?

Dr. Walter Eversley, my theology professor, used to say, "Just because something has never happened before in the history of the world, does not mean it is impossible." Imagine right now, your priest, your spiritual leader floats off the floor, wafts out the door—you rush to follow—and by the time you make it to the porch railing, they are getting smaller as they ascends into the clouds, they become a spec and are gone forever. I think we would all look at each other in disbelief. Who would we tell? How do you report that?

Is it difficult to be a believer and have faith? The thing that I find more difficult than faith is trust, because I do not want to appear foolish. If I trust God, belief is easier, faith is simpler, and grace is given more freely. When my trust fails, the foundation of my faith, crumbles.

I do trust. I trust God and I trust all of us. In Paul's letter he tells us, I have heard of your faith, I see your faith in the actions you take out of love for each other and I give thanks for each and every one of you. "Do not let your hearts be troubled." Trust God, listen to your heart, open your mind to the wonder of God's creation, live into the call to spread the good news of love and salvation to everyone. Remember to pray for each other—we are in this together. Amen