

Seventh Sunday of Easter, Ascension Sunday  
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## **Our Ordinary World**

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 human ingenuity. Now, think about our Christian celebrations. We celebrate some extraordinary events—unimaginable, humanly impossible acts of God in the world. Jesus lifted up his arms, blessed the disciples, and was taken up into heaven. 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 still burns today, and we 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. Jesus is praying to the Father concerning his own glorification, and how His work glorifies the Father by making God known to the people. His prayer describes how vulnerable the disciples are and He asks the Father to make them holy. The passage following today's Gospel finds Jesus continuing the prayer, that those who believe in Him through the word of the disciples—making the Father known to the world may also be one—all together, now. In verse 18 He says, “As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.” Glory, love, vulnerability, self-giving and the revelation of God, are themes of this prayer. The Gospel finishes with Jesus saying to the Father, “I am coming to you.”

Think about the journey the disciples have been on with Jesus, and with us. Close your eyes if you like and 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.

Because this is the Sunday after Ascension, Thursday past, let us look at Luke's Gospel, which has us 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 from Luke's account? "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 whole 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, and 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 how that would work. I am not sure if that Gospel would stand the test of time.

Jesus needed to lead by example. He needed to have fully-human and relatable experiences with the people—with us. We need to participate in changing our ways and learn to love each other—experience is our best teacher. We need to see ourselves in the story, recognize our own 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? Does our relationship to God ever cause extraordinary things to happen? Yes, they happen every time we tell the truth, love an enemy, respect people different from ourselves, stand up for each other, feed, clothe, and shelter strangers who have nothing to give us in return. Overcoming our human nature is extraordinary! Turning away from the Devil's temptations, because we know the love and joy of God.

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—we rush to follow—and by the time we make it to the porch railing, they are getting smaller as they ascend 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 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.

The reading from Acts sheds some light on what comes next for us. "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." Like the men in white robes said, what are we

waiting for? We can begin in this moment, to live into our call to spread the good news of love and redemption. Right now, we can open our minds and begin to change our “normal, ordinary” way of thinking and acting in the world. You do not need to trust my words, trust Peter’s words from his letter: “Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.

I know my next words may frighten some of you, but please, cast off your anxiety. The prayer Jesus is praying in John’s Gospel today is a prayer for us, and our mission of...evangelism. There, I said it, we are called as members of the priesthood of all people to evangelize, tell the world of Christ’s love and redemption. “Do not let your hearts be troubled.”

I do trust. I trust God and I trust all of us. 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 one, we are all in this together. Amen