

May 4, 2008 - Seventh Sunday of Easter - Year A [RCL]

Acts 1:6-14; Psalm 68:1-10, 33-36; 1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11; John 17:1-11

Thursday was the Feast of the Ascension. Alas, because so few of us attend weekday feasts, most parishes celebrate the Ascension on this Sunday following the feast.

Because we celebrate these major feasts of the church with hindsight and developed reflection, we miss out on the intense emotions that those events caused for the ones who initially experienced the events. Immediate experiences are often full of raw emotion that time fades, and so we soften the reality of the initial experience.

Now all of us have experienced death in one form or another. Some of us have even experienced the traumatic and violent death of someone we love. And in most all instances, death itself is upheaval. If you will imagine with me, the death of a loved one, a beloved child or spouse or close sibling. Go through being with that loved one at the time of agony, feel the helplessness the powerlessness to stop the pain, to stop the death. Imagine holding, cradling your loved one at the time of death, closing the eyes, a kiss good-bye. And continue to image the drama and the trauma of the funeral process, at the funeral home, making the arrangements, the viewing with family and friends, the church service, the burial.

Now go home, and the next day awake to find your dead child or spouse or sibling standing in your room beside your bed, alive, not in some mystical imagining or ghostly apparition but in real tangible, physical, touchable, talking flesh and blood. Imagine the shock, the confusion, the doubting of your own sanity... and now listen...

Hear your loved one tell you how much he loves you, how much you must do to honor his memory. Then he explains to you he must leave you again forever, forever in this

life. He entreats you to walk with him out into the backyard and as you arrive the clouds suddenly part, and like a helicopter on lift-off, you see him ascend into the sky. Stunned and not knowing exactly what to do, you lift your hand to wave, and at the same time from your very core you want to scream out, “No, no! Don’t leave us again. Stay.”

Ascension can hurt.

To let go of someone we love takes a great deal of courage, self-sacrifice, love. To let go of someone we love requires thinking of the needs of and benefits to the beloved more than to ourselves. In our natural human state, we want to hold on, cling tight and never let go. The Ascension is a shocking feast of surrender, of being left behind, of letting the other go where we cannot, to wish the best for another even if it leaves less for oneself. In the course of our lives, we experience this letting go of love in many daily ways. It is allowing the other to be other and to not be for us. It takes a great deal of courage to live Ascension., to risk a new dimension of living.

Jesus tells his disciples that they will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them, but how could they possibly know what this could mean? They were raw, vulnerable, still frightened from the horrors of the previous week surprised and shocked with the turn of events at the beginning of the week. This final appearance and then disappearance must have felt like post-traumatic stress, a reliving of the life, death and life again of their hoped-for savior. And, oh, how alone they must have felt as they saw the clouds part and their beloved Jesus taken into heaven, disappearing from sight.

Loneliness is, I think, one of the greatest sorrows we experience in life. All of us have experienced loneliness at one time or another. We can handle much physical suffering. We can handle much emotional suffering. But loneliness rips out the floorboards. We stand in a cold draft with no one to surround us with warmth, left suspended with no one to share the pain.

And in that loneliness it is then Jesus comes and says to us, "I will not leave you. I will be with you, even unto the ends of the earth."

In our humanness we can legitimately ask, What do you mean by this, Jesus? You are about to disappear into the clouds.

But not only does Jesus promise to be with us, But this is a promise of the physical reality of Christ not an image or feeling. Do not be surprised at this fiery order, says Peter in his letter, as though something strange were happening to you. Strange indeed it was to experience the violent death of Jesus, the stone-moving empty tomb, the upper room with Jesus in the midst. And now, this ascending disappearing act.

And yet, the words repeat inside us, "I will not leave you. I will be with you. I must go, but my Spirit will come and be with you."

Incomprehensible.

And then Peter goes on to assure us that the Spirit of God is resting upon us. The Mighty Hand of God is resting upon us and will restore, support, strengthen, and establish us. Ponder those words: "restore, support, strengthen, and establish us".

Ascension comes in the spring and the images are plentiful. Peter's words speak of the fragile life of the perennials, peeking up from the lonely winter soil, the bulbs established in the dirt, supported, strengthened, restored to new life, growing, blooming. There is hope and completion and restoration. Wood grows green again.

We are under the Mighty Hand of God, says Peter.

Place your hands upon your own head. Do so now.

Feel these hands as the Mighty Hand of God. Pause. Press them into you. Hold them there. Be silent under them. Be still under the Mighty Hands of God. Know you are not alone. Know there is no loneliness. Know God is with you, pressing down upon you, supporting, strengthening, renewing, restoring. Begin to feel this. Begin to believe this.

When you are afraid, feel these Mighty Hands of God pressed upon your head. When you are lonely, feel these Mighty Hands of God over you. When you need to be restored, supported, strengthened, established, feel these Mighty Hands of God reaching out and blessing you, touching you, healing, and renewing.

Know that Jesus is praying for us. That is an awesome thought. That Jesus himself is praying for us. Not a friend or a favorite saint, but Jesus. Jesus standing before God, praying for us.

"Protect them," says Jesus to the Holy Father. "Protect them for me. Surround them with your Mighty Hands. Hold them, unite them to us, draw them into us, make us one. One."