

Last Sunday we celebrated Easter and resurrection with joy and gladness; it was a happy morning of worship. Our Gospel text came from Mark 16, which chronicled the events of the women finding the empty tomb and the words of an angel declaring that Christ was risen. That lesson from Mark 16 ended abruptly, with the woman rushing away in silence, overwhelmed by fear and amazement. We noted, though, that our very presence in church last Sunday or any Sunday indicates that the women overcame their fear and amazement to move from silence to joyful witness; otherwise, the story would have ended then and there, and there would be no Christian faith or church 2000 years later. The abrupt ending to that Gospel lesson very much leads on to the question---what happens next? What happened after those fearful, amazed women ran silently from the tomb? How did we get from there-- to here --2000 years later and across the world? The narrative lectionary we are following this year is answering that “what happens next” question by moving us now into the book of Acts, the *one* book within the Holy Scriptures that tells the story of the fledgling church in a narrative form. Within the New Testament we primarily have the Gospels, the letters, and Revelation. The four Gospels tell us the story of Jesus; his birth, ministry, death, and resurrection. And the letters, including the final book of Revelation, only reference the story of the early church in passing; they have other more pragmatic concerns on their mind, like how people in these early congregations should figure out how to get along with one another and be a blessing to the world around them. Only Acts tells the actual narrative of how the church got going, and it is written by the same author as the Gospel of Luke. Unlike *Mark*, the Gospel we’ve been walking through up to this point, Luke fills in more of the details following the resurrection. Jesus appears several times to his followers after the resurrection in Luke’s Gospel, including the beloved story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. But you know how hugely popular sequels and prequels are these days.....Acts is basically the sequel to Luke’s Gospel. Here, in the very first chapter, Luke indicates that he will be continuing the story to fill us all in on “what happens next?”.

The answer to that question, as explained in our lesson this morning: after the resurrection, Jesus was seen at times for 40 days, as He made usually brief appearances to his followers and did some further teaching. He told his followers not to return from Jerusalem back to their home north in Galilee, but to remain where they were, because God had another surprise twist in mind for them, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. They were to sit tight until the moment for this outpouring of the Holy Spirit came. That would happen on the Jewish festival of Pentecost, still to come within about a week and a half from the events in our lesson. *We* celebrate that outpouring of the Spirit every year on Pentecost Sunday, originally a Jewish harvest festival that has become for Christians the birthday of the church. My attention was caught by the fact that the disciples were to remain where they were; to sit tight; to wait for it. I couldn't help but think how difficult that kind of waiting can be for us. When we are excited or alarmed or have a sense of urgency, we usually want to be rushing about, managing people and events, making things happen. But sometimes, Jesus reminds us here, we just need to wait until the time is ripe for *God* to act. I think growing in our ability to trust God's timing is certainly a spiritual discipline.

Our lesson continues with the event we call the Ascension; the taking up of Jesus from earth into heaven. The disciples and Jesus have gathered on the mount of Olivet, less than a mile from Jerusalem. The mountain top setting should tip us off that something big is coming. Alert Scripture readers will recognize that sacred things, manifestations of God, often happen on mountain tops. We might think of the 10 Commandments given to Moses on Mount Sinai, or the transfiguration of Jesus, which happened on a mountain top. We might also recognize that elements like wind, fire, and cloud are also often present when God is manifest; in this instance, there is cloud. In some way that defies physics or easy comprehension, Jesus ascends to God. His time on earth as the embodied Christ is done; a new era is underway in the Christian faith as the coming of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the Church are nearly at hand.

Admittedly, there is some awkwardness about this whole Ascension event. The text reflects the picture of the cosmos that prevailed until relatively recently in human history, maybe the 16th C. In this understanding, earth is here--the level middle of all things. Hell is down there below us. Heaven is up there, above us. It's a very flat, two-dimensional view of reality that got blown out of the water by advancements in physics in the last

5 centuries. The earth is round, far from the center of everything, and the only up and down are completely relative to within a small area in any given time and place. So, it is no longer so clear that we are here, and God is “up there” in terms of physics and spatial relationships. Nevertheless, I suspect most of us still find ourselves imagining the cosmos in much the same way as the people of Jesus’ time did: hell is down, we’re here, and God is up.

In some ways, our texts today seem to support this view, which is hardly surprising, given that they were written by those who saw the cosmos in this way. As we read: “As they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 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.” From this description, we gather that Jesus ascended—went up—into heaven, that two angels appeared to tell the disciples to stop gazing upward and to get on with their lives, and that Jesus will descend at some point in the same way he now ascended.

What goes up, must come down, right? We throw up a ball, it comes down. What goes up, must come down. Unless, of course, we escape the field of gravity somehow. But the story of Jesus, being bigger than the force of gravity, doesn’t quite work out that way. In reality, if we are to use this limited spatial language at all for this event, we might say : what comes down, must go up. Because initially Jesus comes down from God to earth, to be born incarnate as a baby. Jesus initially descends from heaven, to use our up and down picture of the universe, and stays with us a time. He finally ascends back up to heaven, beyond the force of gravity. To be really thorough, we might say that what came down, went back up, and will come down again, since that’s what the angels proclaim—that Jesus will return in the same way he left.

Ultimately, the ascension is a story that blows our understanding of science and physics and gravity right out of the water. This incident in the life of Christ tells us that the risen Christ is not subject to the law of gravity in the same way we are. I guess that should be no big surprise, because there’s a whole lot of other incidents in the life of Christ that have already made clear that God is not limited by natural laws in the same

way we are. The incarnation involves being begotten by the Holy Spirit; that goes against natural law. Many of the miracles of Christ, like walking on water or multiplying loaves and fishes, also break natural laws. To say nothing of the Resurrection itself—no one else has been resurrected in the same way as Jesus before or since that first Easter Sunday. God, in Christ, is not subject to natural laws. This is one of the ways that we understand the divinity of Christ to be a reality. The ascension is one more indication of this; you and I grapple with gravity; the risen Christ does not. We are left with a mystery, frankly, yet *another* aspect of faith that defies easy description or explanation. The more we try to dissect and explain, the worse it may become. Any metaphor or language is wooden and clumsy in comparison to what it hopes to describe. Indeed, just before he ascends, when the disciples are asking Jesus about what and how and when things will happen in the future, he replies, “It is not for you to know”. Not a very satisfactory answer, but one that encourages two things: an acceptance of mystery when it comes to God, *and* a willingness to trust in God to lead the way into that future, regardless. The promise given is that God will now be active and present through the Holy Spirit. And in fact, the book of Acts and the story of the early church is thoroughly steeped in the presence and activity of God as Holy Spirit.

The natural question to ask in regards to this story, I think, is this---where is Jesus? Where *is* the risen Christ now? The answer, as this story and the ongoing story of Acts, will attest, is: Christ is present through the Holy Spirit. Contrary to our two-dimensional way of seeing things, or to the times of doubt and confusion we may have, God is *not* far away from us, up there, somewhere, watching us from a comfortable distance. That particular form of belief, called deism, has been very popular at times in the last centuries. But, from a Christian point of view, that’s missing the point entirely. The essence of the incarnation, of Jesus’ gritty life and painful death, of his physical resurrection, and of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit in the earthy elements of fire and wind, is that God is *here*, *not* out there. God is *everywhere*, but God is also *here*, with us, and God knows exactly how rugged and messy things are here, because God isn’t a pie-in-the-sky God who prefers to see us from afar, so that we look better. If we don’t understand *that* about God, then we are missing the core of

our Christian faith. The whole point of all of it is that God is *with us*. That being the case, where's Jesus?

Where do we experience this Risen Christ through the Holy Spirit *now*?

Scripture throws out some suggestions. One is this: we are the body of Christ. Literally. Because this story explains that the embodied Risen Christ is not present otherwise. The church is Christ's body in the world. *Literally*. Of course, we all know that, we hear it all the time, but maybe we can hear it differently in the light of this ascension event. Where is Christ? He's here, because we are the church. Jesus is here in Knife River, Minnesota, as we worship; and He's also in the third world communities that receive the animals and seeds we send through our efforts through God's Barnyard; and He's at the Center for Changing Lives in Duluth where a homeless teen finds a bed because we are among those who support that ministry; and He's at the Bethel Crisis Shelter in the West End, and the Two Harbors food shelf, and pretty much anywhere else you can think of where people of faith become Christ's body to serve their neighbor. Where is the Risen Christ? He's here, he's with us, in us, among us.

And when we receive the bread and wine of Holy Communion we say that Christ is truly present in the bread and wine. Maybe that, again, is where Jesus is—in the sacrament of Holy Communion, pouring out forgiveness, and in the sacrament of Holy Baptism, welcoming us into community. By the end of this month we will have celebrated 3 Holy Baptisms, along with sharing in the Lord's Supper every Sunday. The sacraments make God real to us. Where is the Risen Christ? He's in the sacraments.

Nor would we want to forget the Word, the Word of God revealed in Scripture. Scripture, in turn, reveals that Christ is the *very Word* of God, the living Word. Where is Jesus? He's in the Word, when we hear it, read it, discuss it, proclaim it, live it out.

This Risen Christ, revealed through the Holy Spirit, is all around us. There is nowhere we can go where God is not, which makes God seem so big and incomprehensible as to be beyond our reach entirely. And yet, this is the same Lord from whom we receive the bread and wine, who washes our feet on Maundy Thursday, who dies and rises for us on Good Friday and Easter, who hears *our prayers*, humble though they may be. What did those followers do after Jesus ascended and the angels told them to stop gawking, get their heads out

of the clouds, and get on with it? They returned to Jerusalem, as instructed, to wait for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost and we read, “all these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer.” That same God who is above and beyond us, is nevertheless as close as our next breath and hears our prayers. How can that be? Can you understand that? Neither can I. It’s a holy mystery. And within the life of faith, holy mysteries happen. So, where is the risen Christ? Look around and see. Amen.