



When I got to college, one of the groups I joined on campus was the university handbell choir, since I was part of one with my home congregation for several years. And to this day, I remember one song in particular we played: one that did not require much of the bells I was responsible for to be rung on the lower end of the musical range. Instead, our director had me take care of the narration voiceover part that was included with the piece. So, while the rest of the handbell choir set the scene with all their

ringing, I would speak the opening words to the Gospel of John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,” and so on. But the director did not want me to just speak that text from my usual spot amidst the choir, as if I did not have a big enough mouth to overcome all the bells around me. She wanted me to go a little higher up.

Now, the campus chapel had the usual lectern off to the side, a few steps up from the ground level, but the full-scale pulpit could only be accessed if you went off to the side of the altar, up a spiral staircase, through a door, and there you would come out overlooking the entire sanctuary from a vantage point that would rival the holy height of the ascension of Jesus Christ that we heard about this morning. Now, I never saw that pulpit used at any other concert or worship, but maybe our director was under the impression that the higher up the words were spoken, not only would it project better, but it may just bring a deeper connection to something holy happening right there and then, to something powerful, to something even God-like.

I will be the first to admit I struggle with this ascension passage. Honestly, I almost wish it would not be included in the scripture at all, because I do not want anyone to come away with the idea that Jesus has ascended into heaven, and has stayed up there ever since, leaving us all behind to fend for ourselves, and just...hope for the best. And with that mindset comes the life-long predicament that the only way we can truly encounter God is way, way off the ground, way, way off from this earth, way, way off from our broken humanity. That the only way we will ever truly experience our Lord is when we get to the heavens with him. And yet, even on this Ascension of Our Lord Sunday, we still believe Jesus is just as much Emmanuel, God with us, now as he was around Christmas five months ago, when we used that title quite often for him.

Thankfully, the passage from Acts includes a line that cannot be overlooked: when the disciples cannot help themselves but obsessively stare at the sky after their precious leader and Lord soars into the heavens, two others then ask, “Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” It isn’t just about reassuring the disciples that Jesus will return in bodily form at some point again, but it serves as a reminder that the disciples have work to do on the ground level, and that on this earth there still remains beauty and hope and yes, even Jesus Christ himself.

So, I think back, again, to my college days, and around the same time when I had to make the trek up that spiral staircase to invoke some sense of power and awe from that pulpit hovering from the heights; around that time I took an education course, and not because I was remotely interested in teaching (that career path was reserved for those with a patience level far beyond my understanding). Nevertheless, one of the class requirements was to tutor so many hours with a young student in the local school district.

Come to think of it, I was more nervous about that than my speaking part from the pulpit. Let's just say that inner-city school system did not receive the highest marks, to say the least. Many of the students came from homes that were not doing so well in a variety of ways. I wasn't sure I would be sensitive to those realities. I didn't know if I was going to be able to help her: whether I was going to make or break if she would have to repeat that particular grade. And yet, oddly enough, she was not anywhere near what I expected.

She was the one who invoked hope. She was the one who was absolutely resilient in spite of the stereotypes made about her, her family, her school. She was the one insistent on seeking out help to clarify a few minor difficulties here and there so that she could not only succeed for herself, but her family as well. Truly, I tell you, there was just as much Jesus there on the ground level in that young girl's heart as there was from any soaring pulpit. There was just as much Jesus in that part of the inner-city that was deemed an outlandish failure and a horrifying nightmare; there was just as much Jesus there as in our university chapel or any massive cathedral around the whole world. It may just be, after all, that there is just as much Jesus here on this earth, as there is in the heavens.

So, the question asked to the disciples remains for us: "Why do you stand looking up toward heaven," as if that is the only place where we are ever going to find him, as if that is the only place where we can experience hope and beauty. It just so happens that this Risen Lord of ours is more than capable of being in more than one place at a time. It just so happens that Christ loves us more than enough, to want to be with each of us, no matter where we go, including the places that have been given up on altogether by the rest. There is, in fact, just as much Jesus down here as there is in all the heavens. There is just as much Jesus all over this world that God still loves beyond our understanding, and the truth is, he never ever left. And for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen.