



Sermon

Acts 1:1-11, Luke 24:44-53
Ascension Sunday
May 4, 2008
Historic St. George's UMC
Rev. Alfred T. Day III

It's a Relationship Thing

"On the third day he rose from the dead; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God..." The Apostles Creed

When the Sunday closest to Ascension Day rolls around, I'm faced with a pastoral dilemma: do I skip the scriptures appointed for today or read the stories of Jesus moving upstairs and taking a seat in heaven? If you were to go by my preaching some years, it would appear Jesus doesn't ascend at all because I thought I could make a better sermon from the lessons for the Seventh Sunday of Easter. The Ascension of Jesus is tricky stuff.

What are we supposed to do with a now-you-see-him, now-you-don't Jesus? First he's risen from the dead and then he's up and gone, hoisted into heaven.

Like a ghost, or like a dream, Jesus vanishes from sight. He leaves no children (unless you buy Dan Brown's fiction in *The Da Vinci Code*). He leaves no estate, no writing of his own, no trace of himself except the feeling that his presence was real and that his absence will be temporary. For his first disciples, there must have been mixed feelings – grief and joy, doubt and hope. They thought he'd be back soon.

I grew up understanding the Ascension of Jesus as the exclamation point on Easter, God's slam dunk in the face of the forces that crowned Jesus' head with thorns. We United Methodists tend to sing our theology: "Crown him with many crowns, the lamb upon the throne, hark how the heavenly anthem drowns all music but its own. Awake my soul and sing of him who died for thee, and hail him as they matchless king through all eternity." Ascension is about triumph and enthronement, about scepters swaying and spheres of divine power and control.

When I moved my mother from assisted living into skilled nursing care, the dementia taking over more and more of her so called

life, I didn't feel much power and control from Jesus or anyone else for that matter.

Several years ago in May, a good friend died. She didn't make it to church like she always did. Checking on her after church, I found her lying dead in her backyard, the victim of a falling tree limb loosed by a thunderstorm the night before. Not much triumph or air of invincibility in that memory either.

I'm coming to understand the Ascension as more a way of marking time, about the moment when we pass from one time to another, from one era to another, from Jesus time into our own time, from tick-tock time to God's time, like my friend's sudden departure or my mother's descending into dementia and eventual death marks a passing of time and life from them to me.

The Bible stories say that Jesus is taken-up into heaven – like Elijah. Puzzling over such gravity-defying levitation of the human body is understandable physically and emotionally. We know about loss. Loved ones are taken from us suddenly or not so suddenly. The manner of their departing leaves us bewildered. We may say with our mouths that they are going to a "better place" but in our hearts we know we cannot follow when we'd like to and have a hard time imagining we ever will. In the difficult days of coming to terms with death and loss, it is hard to reconcile feeling bereft and alone on the one hand, and receiving some kind of inheritance on the other.

So, the stories about Jesus' ascension spin into a lot of complex theological doctrine. But at the core, the Ascension is about a Christian attitude toward death. Take away the fantastic circumstances of Jesus up-going to the right hand of God and the reality is this: Jesus is gone. He rose not just from the dead, but up, up, up and away.

It's tempting to write-off the miraculous and fantastic elements in Jesus launching from earth. Yet, the miracle, the fantastic is the whole point of the story. This ascension thing is Easter squared, Easter to the next power, confirming that Jesus is going upwards to heaven. His disciples see with their own eyes that he is NOT going to Sheol, the netherworld where spirits wander aimlessly looking for a home and never finding one. Jesus goes to the abode of God. There his alive, so maybe our loved ones are alive; maybe death is not the end of us. And who knows, maybe Jesus will be back soon.

Luke tells two stories about the ascension. In the first he says Jesus walked with his disciples "as far as Bethany," the place where his friends Mary and Martha lived. Another gospel says Bethany was the place where Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. So, Bethany was a significant place for Jesus – a good place to spend his last moments on earth. Read between the lines and imagine he chose this place of departure because he wanted to see Mary and Martha one last time. Maybe they ran out to meet him, threw their arms around him in joy and amazement. Mary had no more tears to wet his feet. Maybe Martha got to wait on him one more time. All the while, the wondering disciples who had traveled the few miles from Jerusalem saw why he had risen, why he had come back here. Read this way, the Ascension sounds like a love story.

Luke's second account of Jesus' ascending departure is in Acts. Here, Luke doesn't mention Bethany, but says Jesus ordered his disciples "not to leave Jerusalem" for Galilee (home) right away, instructions that are different from the other Gospels. This version sounds like the ascension of Elijah and then surpasses it completely. As Elijah waited for the whirlwind that would take him to heaven, his disciple Elisha asked for a "double portion" of Elijah's spirit. And sure enough, when Elisha picked up Elijah's mantle, that's what he got, a powerful dose of spirit. In similar fashion, Jesus promised his disciples that he would not leave them orphans or comfortless, but would give them the Spirit. He meant for them to have an inheritance. And when they, in a manner of speaking, picked up his mantle, they got a

double dose (or more!) of the Spirit, the Holy Spirit of Pentecost fame, the whirlwind and the fire – the scriptures we'll hear next Sunday.

This too is a love story. A story of how we survive loss; about how we are not left orphans, about how we are not left comfortless. We don't worry too much about absence in part because the Spirit is alive and present. We don't worry so much about absence sensing divine presence. Jesus may have risen, but in another sense, he remains on the ground. He has become his disciples and his disciples have become him.

I saw a wonderful picture of Jesus' ascension. It was a black and white woodcut print. Jesus is rising up and his disciples watch him disappear in the clouds. But if you look closely at the picture, what the artist wants you to see is not in the clouds but on the ground. You can see Jesus' footprints down on the level where his disciples are standing with their mouths wide open in aha! The artist is asking the same question asked by the heavenly messengers in the Acts story: "Why do you stand here looking into heaven?" Look, here are his footprints."

If you ever visit the Chapel of the Ascension atop the Mount of Olives, just outside Jerusalem, the place where tradition says Jesus did his rocket-man thing, what you'll see smack in the center of the small oval shrine is a footprint in a stone. That's pretty much all there is to this shrine. A footprint. Tradition says it's Jesus' footprint. Jesus footprints are all over the pages of the gospels. Jesus footprints are all over our paths of our lives.

This too is a love story, a story about how love survives loss; about how life overcomes death, about how we are not left comfortless or alone, about how we are left with an impression, about how we are left with an inheritance. Jesus may have risen, but in another sense he remains on the ground. He becomes his disciples and his disciples become him.

I never thought that I would ever mention the Dixie Chicks in a sermon. In a touching interview with lead singer Natalie Maines, talking about her song, Silent House, about inspiration coming from her grandmother, who suffers with Alzheimer's disease,

Natalie tells about coming to terms with her grandmother's slipping away. "Grandma," she said, "I'll remember, so you can forget." Here are the words:

- It's true, I'm missing you – As I stand alone in your room –
- Everyday that will pass by – Every name that you won't recall –
- Everything that you made by hand – Everything you know by heart –
- And I will try to connect – All the pieces that you left –
- I will carry it on – So you can forget.

Can you feel the sense imprint in those words? The impression of one life upon another. "I will carry it on – So you can forget," as if to say, it's not just your life alone, anymore, it's not just your work alone, anymore, it's not just your name anymore. It's your imprint on me. And our imprint on the world you've touched and changed because you were here. You don't have to mind it by yourself, alone. You've given something to me. I'm changed.

This too is a love story, a story about how love survives loss; about how life survives death, about how we are not left comfortless or alone. We don't worry too much about

absence because the imprint is alive and present by the Spirit. Jesus may have risen, but in another sense he remains on the ground where he becomes his disciples and his disciples become him. And so it is with friends and loved ones too.

So now is not a bad time to remind ourselves, people of God, that the primary direction of our lives is not "looking up toward heaven" but rippling out from old Jerusalem like those first disciples, following the way of the imprint, the foot prints, and spreading the good news farther and farther from the old center of the universe, crossing old boundaries into new territories, across borders in and with an abiding love story pointing above and beyond where we thought we were.

Faith, hope and love are Jesus' imprint. Life rising out of death, hope overarching despair, change and growth launching from challenge and difficulty are God's mark upon the ground of our lives.

Now it is our time to make that impression.

Amen.

...