

# *Sermon: Ascension / Easter 7*

The Rev. Mike Wernick

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Year C  
Acts 1:1-11  
Psalm 93  
Ephesians 1:15-23  
Luke 24:44-53

We commemorate Ascension Day today... after which our congregation is named... in his Gospel... Matthew is silent about the Ascension... and the original ending of Mark did not include anything about it... but the ending that was added to Mark about two hundred years later... did... and Luke... who is also accepted to be the author of Acts... actually tells two different versions of the Ascension...

In today's Gospel... the Ascension happens on Easter day... just a few vv. before... Jesus appeared to the two on the road to Emmaus... and was known to them in the breaking of the bread... but in today's reading from Acts... the resurrected Jesus remained with the disciples for forty days... and spoke about the Kingdom of Heaven... and he told them that they would receive power from the Holy Spirit... and after he had said this... forty days after the resurrection... then he ascended...

Gail Ramshaw... a former professor of religion at LaSalle University... who writes on liturgical language... reminds us that in the scriptures... it is for forty days that rain falls on Noah's ark... that the spies scout out Canaan... that Goliath taunts the Israelite army... that Ezekiel lies on his right side... that Nineveh is threatened with destruction... and that Jesus is tempted after his baptism.

At age forty Moses murders an Egyptian... forty years later he meets with God on Mount Sinai... and forty years later he dies. For forty years Israel wanders in the desert and for forty years suffers under the Philistines. Saul, David, and Solomon each reign forty years, and every woman is secluded for forty days after the birth of a son...

Forty days is a long time... for a people whose lives and perhaps survival was determined by heavenly cycles... forty exceeds the familiar lunar... and human pacing of thirty days...

Forty days... for those of us who have given up something for Lent... like a bad attitude... know that's a long time to have to wait... before we can have that thing back...

Ramshaw adds: But forty is also mythically alive... forty is how long we must wait for God's intent to be realized... forty is the metaphysical delay which humans experience... the legendary period of hope... the duration of either joy or sorrow that opens to emotions unknown... it often takes forty to open the door...

So did the Ascension happen on Easter Day... or was it forty days later... is one story right and the other one wrong... were our Jewish-Christian ancestors... telling literal stories... or symbolic stories that we now want to take literally... on our church calendar at least... the Book of Acts has won out over the Gospel of Luke because there *are* forty days from Easter Day to Ascension Day...

But we have enshrined in time... what really exists out of time... and because we've enshrined it in time... we have also unintentionally enshrined it in space... that is... in three dimensions... because the language in Acts and in Luke conveys location: lifted up... gazing up... looking up... taken up... carried up...

But really... after men have gone to the moon... after Voyager and other spacecraft have explored and photographed the solar system... and after the Hubble telescope has peered light years away... and also back in time... no one has seen Jesus in Heaven sitting at the right hand of God...

So which way is up... is Heaven some geographic place up there [point]... not for anyone who'd be on the other side of the earth from us... which by the way is called an antipode... and for us in Grand Rapids... the other side of the earth is in the Indian Ocean southwest of Australia... so by thinking about it in three-dimensions... we miss the mark... we miss the point of the story...

Aside from celebrating Ascension's feast day today... we also celebrate a baptism... a sacrament which embodies the forgiveness of all our sins... and the advent of new and eternal life in Christ... in recent times... our two denominations have emphasized the value of sacraments performed in community... we have moved away from private events and have come to appreciate the power of the assembled body of Christ...

Two or three gathered together in Jesus' name may be enough... but those of you who have worshipped at Synod Assembly or Diocesan Convention will agree... that two or three hundred gathered together is glorious... there is an aspect of group consciousness that cannot be minimized... and it is in the gathered presence that the sacraments move us... change us... transform us...

Perhaps Luke delays the Ascension in Acts... because he was aware... not only of the power of community... but maybe because he became more sensitive to the time it can take for lasting change to be made... most psychologists think it can take at least three weeks to change a habit... for the neural pathways in our brains to be re-wired... and if forty days is how long we must wait for God's intent to be realized... then if we rush it... if we take short-cuts... if we don't work the process... grieve a loss or celebrate a gain... and let that form us... then maybe we're really not changed after all...

Some of you will remember in Shakespeare... when a sleepwalking Lady Macbeth... wracked with guilt over her part in the murders that have been committed... has... as they say... got blood on her hands... and although her hands really are clean... she sees the mark of her sin with inner eyes and proclaims... *Out... out damn spot...* Lady

Macbeth has not herself asked for forgiveness... but in this scene... the Doctor says:  
*God... forgive us all!*

But even when we are baptized... even when our theology proclaims loudly and clearly that we are forgiven... even when week after week... we confess and are absolved of our sins... even when we ask others to forgive us... and even when they have let go of a thing done or said... when it no longer colors their relationship with us... it can color our relationship with them because of what we feel or see... because of what we imagine they still secretly feel... or think... because of what those tapes in our heads say as they play over and over again... almost driving us mad with guilt or shame... and it can be a hard thing to forgive ourselves... the stain on our relationship becomes an inner stain... and the cleansing must become an inner cleansing too...

When you think about it... every one of us is baptized at our births... when water breaks and flows... and we pass through it... this natal baptism is a celebration of the fact that God already loves us... and has already forgiven us... and will forgive us over and over when we miss the mark... not if... but when we fall...

And in today's baptism... we die to our old inner selves... and are reborn from above... are reborn from a higher mind... a higher functioning... with Christ... in the waters of baptism... our sins are forgiven us... in the waters of baptism... the public profession of our faith that we make... unites and integrates us with something far bigger than we can imagine...

But we must learn to forgive ourselves as God forgives us... and when we learn to let go of our guilt... when we are able to let go of the lie that expects us to be more than human... we will find more life... and when we learn to forgive ourselves it will become easier to forgive others... and it will become easier for us to allow others to be human too...

And when we forgive... which means *to let go of*... when we forgive our addictions... or divorces... or sharp tongues... or impatience... or lying... or manipulation... or stealing... or the ways in which we support systems which oppress... when we let go of all the ways we hurt ourselves and each other... they are lifted up... they are carried up... they are taken up... and we... like the disciples who looked up... we will look up... not to a three dimensional place... but we will look up in wonder and awe... towards the God who loves us this much... that anything we have done... any way we have contributed not to life... but to death... will be forgiven and redeemed...

I think the fifth-century pope... Pope Leo... got it right... when he realized that Christ ascended... not into the sky... but into the sacraments... he said that Christ ascended into the sacraments... the outward and visible sign... which unites us with the inward and spiritual gift of God's grace...

We baptize today with water... as John did... but the Holy Spirit baptizes us with fire... and what I hope we remember from Luke... is that as Jesus was taken up... he didn't pray for the disciples... but he blessed them... and that's exactly why we are blessed through the sacraments... thanks be to God...

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