

# Sermon: Ascension Day

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Year A

Acts 1:1-11

Psalm 93

Ephesians 1:15-23

Luke 24:44-53

Theologian John Dominic Crossan wrote... *My point once again... is not that those ancient people... told literal stories... and we are now smart enough to take them symbolically... but that they told them symbolically... and we are now dumb enough to take them literally...*

Like the two creation stories in Genesis... our lectionary today presents two stories about Jesus after the resurrection... Acts tells us that Jesus appeared to them over forty days... and he spoke about the kingdom of God before he Ascended... but today's Gospel tells us... that the Ascension occurred on Easter Day...

Just to frame it... the beginning of Luke 24 recounts how that morning... Mary Magdalene... Joanna... Mary, the mother of James... and some other women... came to the tomb with the spices they had prepared... and found the stone rolled away and the tomb empty... how they met men clothed in dazzling white... who told them Jesus was risen... how the women went and told the apostles... who dismissed their story as an idle tale... though Peter went to check it out... and was amazed at what had happened...

Later that day... Jesus meets the men on the road to Emmaus... and was revealed to them in the breaking of the bread... and these two went back to the eleven and told their story... and while they were talking about it... Jesus appeared to them and showed them his hands and his feet... and asked for something to eat... and ate broiled fish in their presence... the God who feeds us with life... asks us to feed him as well... and this is where today's reading picks up...

And interestingly... from what many scholars believe... Acts and Luke were both written by Luke... so one wonders why one man would write two accounts of the Ascension... I have an idea that I'll share in a few minutes... but either way... we can imagine how the disciples... the men and women... felt... we can imagine... because we know other situations... when someone with whom we resonate... someone who inspires us... and after whom we want to mold our lives... fails... or loses... or dies... we can imagine how these men and women wanted to be in a room by themselves... or withdraw into themselves... because what seemed like a sure thing... what seemed worthwhile enough to bet... not only your money but maybe your lives on... didn't come to pass... when the forces of Empire... stronger than you... rallied to oppose your message... and kill its messenger... and frustrate the ways in which you wanted to live out that message...

Jesus' message... and life... everything he did in it... everything God did through him... was an example of what we are called to do with the resources we already have... to feed the hungry... heal the sick... care for the widow and orphan... clothe the naked... welcome the stranger... lift up the brokenhearted... all of these things lift up others... and through them... we too are lifted up...

*When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight... and while they were gazing up toward heaven... suddenly two men in white robes stood by them... and said... Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?... why are you so distracted...*

We know from other accounts in scripture... that forty means... a long time... and for a long time... Jesus spoke to them about the kingdom of God... and told them that they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now... so what meaning can we take from there being two stories about the Ascension... that it takes a long time for our minds to be opened... and that Eternal Truth transcends literal truth...

These days... technology provides a different kind of cloud... a different way to be distracted... a different way for us to disconnect from each other... and feel disconnected from the work we are called to do... when we look up to Heaven... we rely on God to do for us... what God calls us to do for ourselves...

But God sends the Holy Spirit... to help us and to remind us that the work is here and now... Heaven on Earth... when we look up to Heaven... when we are fixated on the Rapture... or whether others are saved or not... it becomes that much easier to withdraw from God's Grace... from the work we are called to do... and from the deep relationships which support that work...

Like salmon... we swim upstream against the voices which judge us... tell us that we need to be in control... make the right decisions... rely on ourselves... but I am convinced... that there is more subtlety in creation that we can imagine... and we gloss over it... don't have time for it... diminish its value... in too many of our relationships... and in too many of our conversations...

Have you noticed... when someone asks how we are... we usually say... *Fine... how are you?*... and they say back... *I'm fine*... but we rarely say... *I'm struggling with some developmental dependency needs... have you got some time...* or... *I can't quite come to terms not with what my mother said... but how she said it...* or... *I feel disappointed that you didn't do... what you said you'd do... by when you said you'd do it...*

But when we listen to each other's stories... when we try to understand where another person is coming from... connections are formed... and it becomes easier to NOT judge the other... or make them right or wrong... good or bad... but to accept them where they are... and affirm them... and discern new ways to move forward...

Fr. Richard Rohr writes... Grace and mercy teach us that we are all much more than the good or bad stories we tell about ourselves... these self-made identities are based on

hurts... and unconscious agendas... that allow us to see and judge things in a very selective way. Strangely... your True life... [with a capital T] is not about you... it is part of a much larger stream...

In John 4... the Spirit is described as *flowing water* and as *a spring inside you*... in Revelation... it's described as a *river of life*... and faith is trusting the Big River of God's providential love... trusting its visible embodiment as the Son... its flow as the Holy Spirit... and its source as the Father... this is a divine process that we don't have to change... or coerce... or improve... we just need to allow... and enjoy it... and that takes immense confidence... especially when we're hurting...

Usually... Rohr said... I can feel myself get panicky... then I want to quickly make things right... I lose my ability to be present... ignoring my body and heart while my mind is obsessing... I become goal oriented and want to make things happen... to push or even create my own river... yet the Big River already flows through me and I am only one small part of it...

But Faith [with a capital F]... does not need to push the river... precisely because it is able to trust that there is a river... which is already flowing... and we are already in it... So do not be afraid... where have we heard that before... we have been given the Spirit by a very proactive God... and Jesus understood this gift as a foregone conclusion... when he said... *If you, who are evil, know how to give your children what is good, how much more will the heavenly Father give you the Holy Spirit?*

Rohr finishes... ask yourself regularly... "What am I afraid of? Does it matter? Will it matter at the end or in the great scheme of things? Is it worth holding on to?" Grace will lead us into such fears and emptiness... and grace alone can fill them up... if we are willing to stay in the void... we mustn't engineer an answer too quickly... people of deep faith develop a high tolerance for ambiguity... and come to recognize that it is only the

small self... that needs constant certitude or order... our Godself is perfectly at home in the River of Mystery...

I believe that one of the most effective ways to invite Grace into our lives... is through prayer... and in learning to silence the incessant monkey chatter of our minds... it might take forty days... or more... for the Holy Spirit to open our minds too... and as Pastor Erik Doughty wrote... we might need to remind each other too... that staring up towards Heaven... is not the job...

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