

Pentecost ~ Year A
May 4, 2008
The Reverend Dr. Harry L. Howard

“Living The Ascension”

The Lord is risen. The Lord is risen, indeed! AMEN.

The reading this morning from the first chapter of the Acts of the Apostles gives us yet another telling of the Ascension of Jesus, thus marking the end of His incarnate ministry here on earth. The disciples have gathered with Jesus, perhaps not knowing what is about to happen but thinking they might know: Hear their question: “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” You know, we can’t help but chuckle here, or at least I can’t. You see, the disciples have learned a lot but they have so much more to learn. But hear Jesus’ response to the question:

“It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

And then Jesus is lifted up and returns to the Father.

Just a bit over seven years ago my older, disabled brother died at the age of 57. I had been Albert’s legal guardian for a number of years. In the last few years of his life his health problems increased resulting in a growing number of hospitalizations. Finally in April of 2001, he was in the hospital yet again. This time the physician asked me the question we all dread to hear: “We need to put Albert on a ventilator. Will you give permission?” I told the doctor I needed to talk with my mother. Mother and I knew what we would do, but I wanted her to have the opportunity to say it. No, we would not consent to a ventilator. We knew it was time for him to leave and to finally experience the fullness of God’s gracious healing. I called the doctor and told him our decision, but I did ask one thing of him: Please be sure Albert is in no pain. Eighteen hours later Albert Harmon Howard died.

We all know the feeling of letting loved ones go, be it a mother or father, sister or brother, son or daughter, or, yes, even our beloved pets. As we remember those experiences in our own lives of losing loved ones, we can imagine what the disciples’ experience must have been like at the Ascension. It was a moment of letting go of the One whom had come to mean the world to them. You and I know the feeling. It takes extraordinary courage to let loved ones go; it is an act of self-sacrifice. In our natural humanness we want to hold on, don’t we? We want to cling tight and never let go. And perhaps such was the experience of the disciples at the Ascension.

And so it is for you and me. We, too, face the difficulty of living the Ascension. Jesus, in the reading from Acts, tells the disciples that “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witness . . . to the ends of the earth.” Again, the disciples were not sure what that meant for they had not yet experienced the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. And so the anxiety and questions continued for them.

But was this word of assurance only for the disciples? Were they to be the only ones to be the witnesses of Jesus to the ends of the earth? No, not at all. If that had been the case, we would not have a Church, the Body of Christ, today. Instead, it is with each generation that by the power of the Holy Spirit the Gospel of resurrection, of reconciliation, of new life in Christ is offered anew to those who have come after the disciples and to those who will come after us. Consider what we read today in I Peter.

Peter assures us of the Spirit of God resting upon us. The hand of God is resting upon us and thus restores, supports, strengthens and establishes us. And in this restoration by the Spirit of God, we are enabled to continue the apostolic ministry of witness that Jesus gave to his disciples and that has been passed down from generation to generation. Imagine it. Imagine quite literally the hand of God resting on your head this morning. Imagine the power of reconciliation and renewal flowing through your mind and body and spirit this morning. Imagine the renewing joy that God gives you today and every day. It is through the power of the Holy Spirit that the love of God in Jesus Christ is abundantly available to us today and every day, filling us with Christ alive in us to be the witness of reconciliation to all of creation! When you are afraid, feel the hand of God on your head. When you are lonely, feel the hand of God on your head. When you are weak, feel the hand of God on your head. Oh, my! What an amazing Gospel we have received!

Yes, it is from generation to generation that the witness of the Gospel is passed on to the world. In just a few minutes we will baptize Craig Reid Huskey into the Body of Christ and mark him as Christ’s own forever. His parents and godparents will vow to raise him in the truth of the Gospel, to help form him into what God intended him to be. We, all of us gathered here today, will affirm our commitment to support the parents, godparents, Jack, Will, and Craig himself in his journey into the faith of the Church. But most importantly the Spirit of God in Christ Jesus will support, strengthen, guide and protect Craig as he grows into a faithful witness of the Gospel as well.

Again, from the Acts of the Apostles:

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth,” even Knoxville, TN.

AMEN.