

Ascension Day ~ Year A
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“The Story of the Ascension”

I was raised a Roman Catholic. My father is still a practicing Catholic and when I told him that I would be preaching at the Ascension service here, there was a long silence at the other end of the phone. Then, in a strained voice, he asked me, “Can you do that?” I explained that I could do that in the Episcopal tradition and, with a sigh, he remarked, “Well, Jacqueline, you’ve been preaching sermons at me since you were a little girl. I guess you’re qualified for the job.”

How we become qualified to talk to others about God is really what I’d like to talk about today. I think it’s at the heart of the message we receive in today’s readings. I know that many of you have been attending church as long as, or longer, than I have been alive. Some of you have an extensive knowledge of history and the Bible. I’m quite certain that most of you have been to more Feast of the Ascension services than I have. So I’m not standing at this pulpit today because I’m any wiser or more expert than you. I think the fact that I am not a priest and that I am standing at this pulpit today reminds us that Christ’s command to his disciples, “be my witnesses,” applies to all of us. I am approaching today as a chance to witness to you, to tell you what I believe Christ calls each and every one of us to do and be in the world.

The obvious theme today is the story of the Ascension. Let’s take a look at what happens in the readings. In both Acts and Luke, Jesus takes time to explain to the disciples how his ministry, which they have been a part of, fulfills God’s plan as laid out in the Scriptures. In Luke Jesus says to his disciples, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you--that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled. Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, ‘You are the witnesses of these things.’” He then directs his disciples to stay in Jerusalem and await the Holy Spirit. At this point Jesus is lifted up to heaven to take his throne at the right hand of the Father. So what we hear very clearly in the Ascension story, and I think what we sometimes forget, is that the gospel continues to unfold, even after the resurrection. Easter is the fulfillment of the scriptures, but it is certainly not the end of the story. Christ’s Ascension into heaven marks a new era. Christ is now king; his kingdom has begun. When Christ takes the throne as Lord of the world, we become his subjects, part of a purpose that extends to the very ends of the earth, a purpose larger than ourselves. At the Ascension Christ draws his disciples together and tells them very

clearly— yes, death is conquered. Sins are forgiven. I am now king of all. But he does not tell them everything's finished now and it's time to go back home and rest. He tells them, you, my disciples, are now part of this plan that God is working out in time. And that is what Christ is telling not just his original disciples, but us, too. The kingdom of God has arrived in a new way. We are here, in it; there is more to come. And we know from Christ's command "you will be my witnesses," that we have work to do.

The story of the Ascension, wherever it is found in Scripture, is always accompanied by two things: a command and a promise-- the command to be witnesses; the promise that help and empowerment are on the way. The Ascension is one of the points at which we find out that salvation is not just something that Jesus did for us, but something that God is still accomplishing through us. We are called to participate. Our king, Jesus Christ, has taken the throne. Once we choose to serve him, to be his subjects, we orient our lives toward his purpose, a purpose we pray regularly in the Lord's Prayer: "thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Jesus' ministry illustrates how redemption works—it is through the renewal of individual human beings that God works out the renewal of the world. When we tell our own story of God's power in our lives, we tell a small part of God's redemptive power in the world as a whole. The word witness, in Greek, is martyr; it means "one who bears testimony." There is a richness here, to this word, a meaning which includes more than just talking. When we give testimony to God's grace we do so, "not only with our lips, but in our lives, by giving up our selves to (His) service."

For the disciples, we assume, witnessing was easy. They were real eyewitnesses to Jesus' ministry. They experienced first-hand the redemptive, healing power of God's message. But I find it interesting that a lot of the time the disciples didn't seem to understand what they were seeing and hearing, even at key moments, like the crucifixion and the resurrection. It just didn't make sense to them. Throughout his ministry with them, Jesus answered their questions, corrected their assumptions, and generally tried to explain what he was doing along the way. The disciples weren't alone in their confusion. Everyone Jesus encountered was faced with the same problem. Throughout the gospels there's this constant interplay between what people see happening right before their very eyes, and what they know is supposed to be true. And everyone in the gospels ends up making a choice—either they stick with what they know should be true, the way they think things are supposed to work—people don't rise from the dead, the lame don't just stand up and walk, the Messiah couldn't possibly be a local carpenter's son, God's messengers don't break the Sabbath law—or else they believe what they actually see and experience, they believe "the eyes of their heart" we hear about in the reading today from Ephesians. I'm sure you can think of many examples of this sort of dynamic in the gospels, but I'd like to take a single example and look at it more closely. It's the story of the healing of the man born blind in the

9th chapter of John. Jesus walks past a man who has been blind from birth. His disciples are sure they know why he is blind—because either he or his parents have sinned. So they ask Jesus who did the sinning. Jesus gives them a surprise answer: neither of them sinned; he is blind “so that the works of God might be made visible in him.” It’s at this point that Jesus spits on the ground, smears mud on the man’s eyes, and tells him to wash. The man regains his sight. What happens when the man is healed? His neighbors don’t believe it’s the same man; they say, “No, that’s not the man we know who was blind; he just looks like him.” So then the man is taken to the Pharisees. The Pharisees make the blind man tell his story again, and they argue with him. “This man, Jesus, is a sinner.” But the blind man sticks to his story. He repeats what has happened to him, which makes no sense to him or to anyone else. The blind man answers the Pharisees, “If he is a sinner, I do not know. One thing I do know is that I was blind and now I see....”

That is how God turns us into his witnesses. First, we have the experience of God’s healing power in our lives. We see pretty clearly that that experience doesn’t fit in with the way we thought the world worked. So we ask questions; we try to understand what it means. For many of us, it’s the experience that comes first; the understanding later. And I think that may be why we need the Holy Spirit. We can and must experience God as single individuals living separate lives, but it is the Holy Spirit, the spirit of Truth, that pulls all of our disparate experiences together and unifies them in God’s purpose, linking each one of us to the mission of God, like a conductor guiding the individual instruments of an orchestra.

It is not surprising, then, that the Ascension and Pentecost are key moments which Christ uses to turn his individual followers into a unified group. He chooses them initially one by one; at the Passion, they disband in fear; after Christ’s arrest, execution and resurrection, they scatter. Even post-resurrection Christ shows himself not to the group as a whole, but to individuals and small groups. And then, at the Ascension, Christ tells his disciples to stay in one place so that they can receive the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit descends once they are all gathered together in one room. After Pentecost, later in Acts, they disperse again and begin their travels. But for the Ascension, and for Pentecost, Jesus makes clear that they are to remain together. They are bound at those moments by their shared experience of Jesus’ ministry and by Christ’s command to witness to that experience. And they are ultimately bound by the Holy Spirit, the spirit of truth, which guides them in God’s larger purpose.

And so I like to think of the Church of the Ascension as a place that lives into its name. I think of it as a place where, despite many things that have stressed and scattered us, we come together as a community which is unified by our shared experience of Christ’s good news. I like to think of it as a place where, because we gather as witnesses, we are empowered by the Holy Spirit and called to join in God’s holy purpose. Each and every one of us is called to witness to God’s kingdom. We don’t need to be a certain age. We don’t need any special degrees or training. We don’t even need to understand how it all works. The basic facts are these: Jesus is Lord. The kingdom of God is already here; we are building

for it even now. So look with the eyes of your heart. And even if what you see God doing in your life doesn't make sense yet, tell your story. Share the story of God's grace and power in your life. Because when you tell your story, you're telling God's story, too. And, on this Ascension Day, that's what God is calling us to do, even to the ends of the earth.