

Easter 7A: May 21, 2023

All Saints', Littleton, NH

The Rev. Curtis Metzger

Acts 1: 6-14

Psalm 68:1-10, 33-36

I Peter 4: 12-14, 5: 6-11

John 17: 1-11

Today's first lesson is about the Ascension. It appears early in Acts, and interestingly nowhere in the gospels except an appendix in Mark that is suspect, and a similar addition at the end of Luke that is similarly suspect in origin. He is with them, as the beginning of this chapter tells us, for forty days after the resurrection. In the lead up to the ascension the disciples ask him one more time – is this the time you are going to restore the kingdom to Israel. It is almost humorous that even after all of Holy Week – his crucifixion and resurrection and his final attempt to show them how they are to be in the world, that they are still looking for him to get rid of Pilate and Rome. The whole sense of a Davidic earthly kingdom was so cemented in their minds.

But Jesus tells the disciples that the Holy Spirit is coming and will lead them from Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. Then he departs in 'a cloud'.

Now in this scientific age the notion of someone rising bodily up into the clouds seems a bit simple taken literally. One wonders what it was they saw and experienced. The book of Acts was probably written a generation after it happened, so what was the oral tradition of the story that had been passed on. Or was it Luke's memory of events at the end of his life? Well, they certainly didn't have an understanding of the heavens as we do today. They thought the earth was flat and that above the clouds was literally,

heaven. If we believed that today every time we went up in a plane we'd be scanning the clouds to see if we could catch a glimpse of Jesus.

The only way I can relate to this is really more about a different dimension. It was clear after the resurrection that the resurrected body of Jesus was something different – he suddenly appeared, he walked through closed doors, and on this instance, he disappeared into a cloud.

The whole idea of a cloud has rich biblical precedent. It was Moses who encountered God in a cloud on Sinai. This cloud was called 'shekinah' – rendered to us as 'the glory of God'. When Peter, James and John were with Jesus on the mountain in the transfiguration, there was a cloud that came down over them. The 'cloud', for faithful Jews, was a sign of the presence and the glory of God.

⁵While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" (Mt 17:5)

Interestingly, in my work in hospice and my reading on near death experiences, people often describe something like a cloud, often combined with a tunnel and light. There are so many stories of people approaching death and seeing this cloud, tunnel, and light, and then loved ones beckoning them to come into the cloud and the light. Maybe this is what they experienced when Jesus finally said goodbye – somehow the cloud-tunnel-light was made visible and Jesus walked into it. He went into 'glory'; he had been 'glorified'.

This story of the Ascension was really the preface to the Day of Pentecost (next Sunday) and the commissioning of the disciples as the church. As long as they had Jesus around, even in his resurrected form, they would be waiting for him to show up and give direction. Instead of that, they would all receive the spirit of Jesus within themselves to empower them for the work of 'the kingdom'. They would no longer be waiting around for Jesus to show up because he was in each one! And of

course, next week we celebrate this coming of the Spirit into the lives of the disciples and for which we celebrate the birthday of the church.

But though this is glorious, First Peter, written likely when the church was going through persecution, reminds us that following him may at times mean suffering like him. Indeed, brothers and sisters around the world may be suffering also, as I Peter says. But if we should 'cast all our anxiety upon him, for he cares for you.' ...and, ultimately, 'The God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.' These are words we should memorize and repeat in times of trial---to ourselves and each other.

And finally, this portion of John 17, what is called the 'high priestly prayer' of Jesus, should be our guidance in the nature of our struggle towards glory. This whole chapter is a prayer of Jesus and the author has Jesus praying desperately for union with God, and with each other – "Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one."

That we may be one.....what was so key that this was the prayer of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane? What should our prayer be? And did you notice that the last line of the Acts lesson tells us that in that upper room where the disciples retreated they 'were constantly devoting themselves to prayer'!