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The Sixth Sunday of Easter

Ascension Sunday (Ascension Day is Thursday May 13)

The Pastor's Reflection

This reflection by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson, D.Min., Ph.D. is also available in audio form on our "Pod Cast" site as part of a devotional service. To access it, click on the link at the top of the Sermons page.

Scripture Lessons: Acts 1:1-14
Luke 24:44-53

"When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight." (Acts 1:9)

"And He departed from our sight that we might return to our heart, and there find Him. For He departed and behold, He is here." (St. Augustine)

The Easter season, the fifty days between Easter and Pentecost, is a special time in our church year. It is a time that we set aside to reflect on what happened to Jesus following his crucifixion. On Easter Sunday we focus our attention on the miracle of his resurrection, on the empty tomb. In the seven weeks that follow, we focus on the post-resurrection encounters, the disciples' experiences of meeting their risen Lord in several different places and even forms.

We do this throughout the Easter season not only to help us understand what the disciples experienced following Jesus' death and resurrection, but also to help us understand the existential themes of death, life after death, and heaven as they apply to us and to our loved ones who have passed on, loved ones whom we might mistakenly believe are no longer with us.

One question that arises from the disciples' descriptions of their experiences of the risen Lord by the tomb, in the upper room, by the side of the lake, or on the road to Emmaus is whether Jesus was in what we would call "heaven" when the disciples encountered him. It seems to me that the point might be not whether *Jesus* was in heaven at the time of these encounters, but whether *the disciples* were in heaven or in the kingdom of God when they suddenly realized that they were in the presence of their risen Lord. A third option, of course, is that *both* Jesus and the disciples were in heaven or the kingdom of God together!

The scriptural accounts of the post-resurrection encounters raise the possibility that the disciples were able to see, hear, and even touch Jesus because they were able to see *deeper*, because *they could tap into the dimension or realm of heaven, of eternity, the realm where Jesus came from and where Jesus always is*. I believe that this realm, which we usually think of as distant, *is actually closer to us than we might think*.

Three of the four gospels conclude with a description of how Jesus left his disciples, and two gospels describe how he ascended to heaven. They state that, in the presence of his disciples, Jesus actually went up into the air. Since this coming Thursday, May 13, is Ascension Day, and since we probably won't be doing it up big this year as a church, I thought we might take a few minutes this morning, on the Sunday preceding Ascension Day, to explore this important doctrine, this important event in the life of Jesus and also his disciples. It is actually a celebratory day grounded in the archetype of transformation.

We should begin by noting that the three synoptic gospels are not in total agreement with regard to the ascension and, for some reason, it is not mentioned at all in the Gospel of John. I would like to note that this discrepancy, which did not seem to have bothered the writers/compilers of the gospels and also those who selected these four gospels for inclusion into the canon, into the official Bible as we know it, also does not bother me.

By the time I attended theological school, probably because of my background in philosophy, I had abandoned the idea that the Bible is the literal Word of God and, as such, is infallible. I see the Bible as a collection of different kinds of writings (history, poetry, prophecy, religious experience, symbolism, teachings, moral guidelines, etc.) by many different authors, a complex weaving of documents that circumambulate around a central theme that spanned several thousand years of human history, a record of people's experiences of one particular revelation or manifestation of God, of the overarching (or underlying) archetype of Divinity.

The Bible is a record of the experiences of a particular group of people, a tribe/nation that lived several thousand years ago in a culture that is quite different from ours, e.g., in the treatment of women and the owning of slaves. This is why I believe it is foolish (and can be harmful or even evil) to try to apply biblical passages or teachings in a literalistic way to the incredibly more complex personal and social problems of our time.

Also, since different people can have different experiences of God, it does not bother me in the least that many of the biblical descriptions of the Old Testament Yahweh, the God of Israel, the Lord God of the New Testament, and even the descriptions of Jesus, who was proclaimed to be the Christ, differ from each other or even appear to contradict each other. Once again, it appears that the early church leaders who selected the writings that would be included in the official canon, and who determined which writings (e.g., the Gnostic gospels) would be excluded, valued this diversity. If they didn't, I'm sure they would have cleaned the whole thing up and made everything consistent.

The Gospel of Mark, the earliest of the gospels to be written/compiled, has two endings, commonly called the shorter and the longer endings. The gospel writer apparently didn't know which of the endings was the true, the earliest, the most authentic ending, so he decided to include both in his gospel, and he named them the shorter and the longer endings. The fact that the two endings differ dramatically from each other in their

description of what happened after the resurrection apparently didn't bother Mark (thus proving my point).

The shorter ending makes no mention of Jesus' ascension. In fact, there is no mention of any post-resurrection meetings with his disciples. A young man, presumably an angel, tells the women to tell the disciples that Jesus is going before them to Galilee and that they will see him there. The shorter ending concludes with the following:
And afterward Jesus himself sent out through them [the disciples], from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation.

The so-called longer ending contains a description of the ascension. In the longer ending we read,
So, then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them [the disciples], was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. And they [the disciples] went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it.

The longer ending implies that Jesus is both in heaven, seated at the right hand of God, and *also* here on earth, working *with* the disciples and confirming their proclamation of the Kingdom of God by miracles and signs. I'm sure that is how the disciples experienced it. They experienced Jesus, the risen Christ, as *both* in heaven *and* on earth, as both distant and present, as both transcendent and immanent.

In the Gospel of Matthew there is no mention of Jesus' ascension. Following his resurrection when Jesus meets the disciples on a mountain in Galilee, Jesus says to them,
All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

Note that in Matthew's account, Jesus does not leave the disciples. He does not ascend or go to heaven. Rather *he promises to be with them always*, even to the end of the age.

The passage we heard this morning from the Gospel of Luke contains a description of the ascension. It says,
Then Jesus led his disciples out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.

This passage suggests that Jesus "withdrew" from the disciples and was "carried up" into heaven. In Luke, there is no promise that he will continue to be with them, only that they will be "clothed with power from on high," which I take to mean that they will receive the gifts that attend the presence of the Holy Spirit.

These accounts, though they differ, suggest that following his resurrection Jesus is both transcendent, separate from us, dwelling in a place we might call heaven, and also immanent, with us, right here on earth, closer to us than we are to ourselves. The disciples realize that although Jesus left them, he did not really leave them. *In their experience*, although Jesus is in heaven with God, he is also here on earth.

There are five parts to the Easter story. The first is Jesus' crucifixion. The second is the resurrection, what happened to Jesus' spirit and body the night following his burial. The third is the post-resurrection experiences, the disciples' encounters with the risen Christ at the tomb, in the upper room, by the lake, and on the road to Emmaus.

Jesus' ascension, his departure from earth and entry into heaven, is the fourth dimension. The Doctrine of the Ascension is included in the Apostles' Creed, formulated approximately 300 years after Jesus lived, the words of which are as follows:

*I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.*

*I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.*

*I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.
Amen.*

As you might suspect, I have difficulty with certain parts of this creed—and actually, any and every creed. This is why I am glad that our church is not a creedal church, and the ecclesiastical tradition in which our church stands is not grounded in a particular creed, the assent to which is a necessary precondition to membership. In any event, the Apostles' Creed is evidence of the importance of Jesus' ascension to our Christian beliefs.

According to the book of Acts, the ascension happened exactly forty days after Easter. As we know, the number forty is archetypal; it appears time and again in scripture and in the teachings of other world religions as a symbol of wholeness or completeness. In the book of Acts and the gospel of Luke, which were written by the same author (Luke), the ascension marks the end of the post-resurrection experiences.

In some of his post-resurrection encounters, Jesus appears in human form. He invites Thomas to touch the nail holes in his hands and the spear wound in his side. He breaks bread with two disciples after they travel together on the road to Emmaus, and he eats breakfast with seven others beside the Sea of Tiberias.

In other post-resurrection encounters, Jesus seems to be more spirit than flesh. He appears in the midst of the disciples even though the doors of the room where

they are meeting are closed and locked. He suddenly vanishes from their midst following their recognition of him in the upper room, on the road to Emmaus, and by the lake. In his encounter with Mary by the tomb, Jesus asks her not to touch him since he has “not yet ascended to the Father.” This implies that Mary *could* have touched him but, for some reason (which I tried to explain two weeks ago), she should not.

As we think about our loved ones who have passed away, we do so in light of our belief in the power of the resurrection. This is why the apostle Paul tells us that “we should not grieve as those do who have no faith.” We know our loved ones are alive in our hearts and in our memories. We trust they are alive in some way in the presence of God, in what the Episcopal church calls “the nearer presence of God.” However, the disciples’ experience of Jesus after he died may be a lesson to us, assuring us that, like Jesus, our loved ones may also be with us as a living presence, *a presence that can only be sensed through the connecting power of love*. Not to argue with my Episcopal colleagues, but there may not be a “nearer presence of God.”

In the account of the ascension in the book of Acts, Jesus goes up into the air. Luke tells us he was “lifted up” or “carried up” into heaven. I’m not sure we have to take the descriptive “up” literally, though we instinctively raise our eyes when we pray. In Jesus’ time, when people believed in a flat earth and a three-storied universe, they pictured heaven up in the sky and hell under the ground. It is interesting that the two men in white robes who suddenly appear beside the disciples at the tomb ask them, “Why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” Apparently, we don’t have to look up to see Jesus.

With regard to this morning’s gospel reading, the footnote in our Bible (the New Revised Standard Version) indicates that there were two different descriptions of the ascension in the ancient texts. In one, Jesus simply parts, departs, or withdraws from his disciples. In the other, he departs from them and rises up to heaven. The first implies that he just separates himself from his disciples. The second implies that he ascends to heaven. So, which was it?

I think our language may be the problem. When human beings became conscious, they began to split their experience of the world into opposites: up and down, left and right, light and dark, good and bad, God and humanity, heaven and earth, life and death. This is how our mind and our language structure reality, but it may not be how reality is. Reality may not be separated into the neat little categories that our language, our description of reality, would lead us to believe. For instance, we have recently come to discover that even gender and gender identity are not binary, as we once thought; they are fluid.

Think of the dichotomy of mind and body. We think of them as separate and distinct, but are they? We can’t have mind without body. If we maintain their separate existence, we create a conundrum; how do they communicate with each other? To solve this problem, Christian Scientists maintain that mind is the only reality, physical matter is an illusion, and prayer is the only effective response to illness. Materialists, on the other hand, believe that everything is reducible to body, that the mind is nothing more than the physical brain. Their approach to healing is chemical. They do not believe in psychosomatic medicine, though we know from our own experience that a

psychological condition can give rise to an ulcer, and that a chemical imbalance in our body or brain can affect our mind.

When we dichotomize, we invariably place a value judgment on the polarities. The belief that spirit is good and flesh is bad led to asceticism, the denigration of the body as a path to spiritual enlightenment. The belief that heaven is good, and that earth is consequently bad, evil, and fallen, has kept us from embracing and caring for the wonder of God's creation. This has provided a theological justification for the desecration, the de-sacralizing of the environment.

I recently ran across a quote from Elizabeth Barrett Browning: "Earth's crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God: but only those who see take off their shoes." I like this.

Jesus ushers us into a different reality or a different grasp of reality. As we know from the post-resurrection appearances, the disciples experience him as *both spirit and flesh*. He can walk through walls, yet he eats fish. He is in heaven, yet he is on earth with us. He is no longer present, except to those who love him. To these people, his disciples, he is very present.

I believe that Jesus overcame death by *dissolving the dichotomy* between life and death, earth and heaven, this side of the grave and the other. This is why I find it sad when I hear some people say that they can't wait until they die so they can be with God. I do believe that when we die, we will be in "heaven" with God. I also believe that we are in heaven with God right now because heaven is right here on earth, though we may not know it.

The ascension, like the virgin birth, which is also mentioned in the Apostles' Creed, may have happened literally. Like the virgin birth, the ascension may also be a symbolic expression of a deeper truth. This would explain why the accounts are so paradoxical. The deeper message of the virgin birth is that Jesus is both human and divine. The deeper meaning of the ascension is that Jesus is both in heaven and here on earth. He is distant, yet present. He is with God and also with us. This means that we are with him and with God. I think this is how a mystic would see it.

The great cathedrals of Europe were built in a period when most of the people who attended church were illiterate. Those who constructed these massive edifices took great pains to teach the faith through art. If you walked clockwise through the area behind the main altar at Notre Dame in Paris before it was devastated by fire, you would have found the story of Jesus' life depicted in sculpture and painting. Even if you couldn't read, you could connect the scripture readings you heard when you attended the Roman Catholic mass with the pictures. This would imprint these teachings as images in your mind.

The cathedral in York, England contains an interesting painting. In one of the side chapels, an unknown craftsman created a testimony to the ascension. On the ceiling at the top of the archway is a painting showing eleven faces gathered in a circle. They are the twelve disciples, minus Judas Iscariot, who are with Jesus as he departs into heaven. At the very center of the painting is a pair of feet--all that would be seen by the disciples as Jesus is lifted up or ascends to heaven.

Is this *literally* the way it happened--that Jesus simply rose into the air and faded away into the clouds? Perhaps. Or was this an attempt to depict a deeper truth about heaven and earth, this life and the next, in a picture? No matter what you believe, the disciples apparently experienced Jesus as both in heaven and on earth. And this is also possible for us!

St. Augustine said it best: *"And He departed from our sight that we might return to our heart and there find Him. For He departed and behold, He is here."*

For those of us who have lost loved ones, let us think of our loved ones who have died as living on not only in our memories but also in the mysterious realm of God. Let us consider the possibility that they are still alive, just in another realm (perhaps like a parallel universe), and that they can be present to us in a very real way, just as Jesus was to his disciples. Let us consider the possibility that, as Augustine implies, we can find our loved ones, just like we can find Jesus, *in our heart*.

My prayer for us is that in relation to our Lord and our loved ones who have passed away, we, like the disciples, will experience the message of the ascension--the deeply comforting sense of a special presence.

As we journey forth as twenty-first century apostles, God grant that the light is planted within our soul will never go out, and that we will find ways to share this precious light with a broken and darkened world.