

## Sermon for the 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, May 24, 2020

*When the apostles had come together, they asked Jesus, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "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." When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, 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."*

*Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers. Acts 1:6-14*

Have you ever thought about how often we place everything we do on a vertical plane or axis, that is, up or down. We prefer our grades to go up, we are worried about our investments going down. We take medication to lower our bad cholesterol and keep our blood pressure from getting too high. In the church, success is sometimes determined by an increase of people in pews, only, right now our attendance is lower than ever. But hey, our Facebook likes are going up!

We inherited this way of directional thinking from earlier civilizations. Their understanding of a three-tiered universe is evident throughout the scriptures and in other writings from the ancient world. Earth, the middle tier, was flat. God lived in heaven above on the top floor, and hell was in the basement. In our Gospel reading today, Jesus looked up to heaven, and in our first lesson from Acts, Jesus was lifted up into heaven. In the late second century, Christians confessed the Ascension in the Apostles' Creed: "He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father." And in our Eucharistic Prayer the priest calls "lift up your hearts" and the people respond, "we lift them to the Lord." It will be a glorious day when we can again gather around the communion table and lift up our hearts!

In our creeds and confessions, art and architecture — from ancient manuscripts to icons, to fine art through the ages, Christians have professed their belief in the Ascension. Jesus went up — because up was where God was believed to be. That's why we still use the flat-earth language of God up top sending Jesus down to earth to be born in a manger, then taking him up in order that the Spirit might come down in order that believers might be able to go up. Are you experiencing vertigo yet? A dear priest friend of mine always referred to this season in the Church as "elevator season"! How do we make sense of it in light of our 21<sup>st</sup> century scientific knowledge?

In our reading from the Acts of the Apostles this morning the apostles are talking with Jesus - the resurrected but not yet ascended Jesus. He has been appearing and disappearing all over the place for forty days since his resurrection at Easter. His followers seem to have almost gotten used to Jesus in this new "now you see me now you don't" form of being, and are again becoming comfortable, and thinking just maybe this is going to work after all. They ask him, "Lord is *this* the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" Perhaps we can imagine Jesus rolling his eyes at this question because they are still not understanding the bigger picture, they are still focusing on their own personal desires, still hoping things will return to the way they had been before Jesus was crucified.

They are weary, they are anxious and they want life to be good again, they are tired of waiting in uncertainty. So they ask Jesus the question, no more hemming and hawing. “Is this the time Lord? Are you going to restore the kingdom to us *now* Lord? Or not?” And I’m guessing that the answer Jesus gave them was not exactly what they wanted to hear, and mostly because they could not envision how it would play out. “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 the next thing they knew, Jesus was disappearing again, only this time they knew it was different, that he was truly leaving them to return to his Father. They had to trust that Jesus would send the Holy Spirit. As if to confirm that, two men in white robes suddenly stood by them, and seeing their incomprehension of all that they had just seen and heard the men in white said, “Men of Galilee, 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.”

Haven’t we all found ourselves in such an incomprehensible place? Life gets crazy, chaotic, and unmanageable. Whether it’s a personal crisis, the loss of a loved one, or a pandemic, we find ourselves looking up to heaven wondering what on earth we are supposed to do next, wondering how we will even take the next step when it seems so daunting, so uncertain. Yes, I think we do know something of what those first followers of Jesus were feeling that day. Right now, we may be wondering when we will finally be able to regather in this worship space, and we might not hear exactly what we want to hear. Some of us are eager to return and some of us don’t feel safe returning yet. We might not be able to envision how it’s all going to play out.

The apostles were expressing the most inexpressible mystery of the presence of God in the only language they knew – a pre-scientific language. We have the advantage of knowing that the world is *not* flat and that the universe is not constructed in three vertical tiers. We have the benefit of science, but even then things aren’t always easy to explain. Perhaps that’s the point. Perhaps we are trying too hard to explain things; to find answers to questions such as “how” and “when.”

Jesus has gone before us into the future... ahead of each one of us to a future we cannot yet see or comprehend. And yet, Jesus is still with us in the presence of the Holy Spirit to help us discern, over time, all of our “hows” and “whens.”

Jesus is, even now, sending the Advocate to a group of people in our diocese to help us discern when it will be safe to return to our worship space and how it will look when we do. A group of parishioners, doctors, nurses, musicians, educators, and clergy are busy working on all the details, and there are many, so that when we return we will be able to provide worship that is safe for those who can return, even as we continue to care for those who are most vulnerable among us. It is ongoing work for which we will not have all the answers, but we are listening for the Spirit of truth and always holding foremost Jesus’ command for us to love one another. What we do know is that as we follow Jesus, who goes before us into the future, things will be different.

The apostles had their lives turned upside down yet again, but even in their uncertainty, Jesus redirects their focus, expanding their expectations and their horizons. Might Jesus be redirecting our focus here at Christ and Grace? And in the Church in the world? It’s not enough to think only in terms of our own personal interests and hopes. Jesus sends us out in the power of the Holy Spirit to be witnesses to the ends of the earth! We are not called to stand in the same place where we last saw Jesus. We are called to look around for where Jesus is going next. We can stand around looking up and get a crick in our neck, or we can follow Jesus. Amen.