

Date: May 28, 2006

SUNDAY: Ascension

SERMON: Memory and Mission

Text(s): Acts 1:1-11; John 17:6-19

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One Sunday, as the family were on their way home from church, Mom asked little Johnny what he had learned in Sunday School that morning. Johnny said that they had learned about the Ascension of Jesus. Mom then asked him to tell her what he had learned. Johnny said, “Well, first the twelve apostles took Jesus down to Cape Canaveral, and they dressed him up in a spacesuit and put him in the space shuttle on top of a big rocket. Then they had the countdown, and he blasted off to heaven.”

“Wait a minute,” replied his mom. “Did your teacher really tell you that?”

“Well, not exactly like that,” Johnny replied, “but if I told you what she really told us, you’d never believe it.”

Today is the last Sunday in the church season of Easter, the Sunday nearest to Ascension Day, on which the Church observes the Feast of the Ascension of Christ, and I don’t suppose many of us are much better off than little Johnny in our understanding or appreciation of this particular festival. If you were in a business that had European customers or branch offices and had tried to call your contacts there this past Thursday, you’d have found no one home; Europeans celebrate the Feast of the Ascension religiously, but few celebrate it for religious reasons; it’s just a good excuse for a long weekend.

Yet, no less prominent a figure than St. Augustine insisted that its beginnings as a solemn celebration go back to apostolic times, and Augustine himself reflected deeply on the meaning and importance of this festival as that which completes, and therefore gives validity to all the other Christian festivals, especially Christmas and Easter.

It’s thanks to St. Luke’s narrative in the

first chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, our first lesson for today, that the custom of observing the Ascension of Jesus as a separate event forty days after his resurrection evolved. It’s also the source of most of our visual imagery of the Ascension; indeed it has inspired artists down through the centuries as well as provided the material for most Sunday School materials, where Jesus has often been depicted as floating up into the clouds.

My very favorite painting of the Ascension hangs in the Unterlinden Museum in Colmar. We have been to that museum on several occasions, primarily to see the wonderful and unique Isenheim Altarpiece by Matthias Grünewald, which I’m sure some of you have seen as well. In the same room where that famous altarpiece is located is a much smaller painting depicting the Ascension of Jesus. It’s a painting that’s obviously based on a literal and naive reading of Luke’s narrative. At the bottom of the painting stand the apostles gazing upward. At the top of the painting is just a thick gray layer of cloud, and sticking down through the bottom of the cloud are two large bare feet. That’s all that remains of Jesus—two bare feet hanging down from a cloud.

So, perhaps, for just a few moments this morning, we can try to make a start at reclaiming this truth we call the Ascension of Christ so that we begin to see its importance for our lives and for our faith.

It may help us to begin by trying to imagine ourselves back in the position of Jesus’ own disciples in the immediate aftermath of his crucifixion. How devastated they must have been when the cause to which they had given their lives, the person to whom they had pledged their loyalties, in many cases leaving behind family and tribal and village loyalties, suddenly was seized by his enemies, given a mockery of a trial before the Roman governor, and then summarily executed in a most brutal fashion.

The first direct evidence of how those earliest disciples responded to this disaster comes to us about 15-20 years later when a man named

Paul began writing letters to some congregations of Christians in Asia Minor. The first two decades after the crucifixion are simply a black hole for historians of early Christianity. Paul's writings are the earliest Christian writings that we possess. He never tells us anything directly about the reactions of Jesus' disciples or the formation of the earliest communities of Christians, nor does he tell any stories about Jesus himself. He's simply writing letters to churches that he himself established to answer their questions or address problematic issues they're facing. From those letters, suddenly, we become aware that Christian congregations already exist in the urban centers all around the eastern rim of the Mediterranean and even in Rome itself. From this fact, the existence of a rapidly expanding, missionary enterprise, we infer that something must have happened to transform the shattering experience for Jesus' followers of his execution into a galvanizing, energizing motivation to take the message of and about Jesus to the wider world. That something, we learn from Paul's letters, is what he calls "the resurrection of Jesus from the dead."

The gospel narratives with the stories of Jesus were all written at least a decade or two later than Paul's letters (in the case of Luke and John, which we're looking at this morning, at least three decades after) and are the products of firmly established Christian communities and mature Christian leaders reflecting theologically on the meaning of Jesus' life and death for their own generation as they struggled to live faithfully and witness boldly. They, and the communities for whom they wrote, speak of experiencing mysterious presence of Jesus with them as they gathered weekly for worship and communion. For them, what Paul had called "the resurrection of Jesus from the dead," was simply assumed. It's why they existed as a community. But it was not so obvious how it was that they could actually experience Jesus as alive and present among them. Where was Jesus if he was no

longer physically with them? What was the meaning of the fact that when they got together for a simple meal of bread and wine to remember him as he had urged them to do, they became aware that he was there at the table with them, invisibly, but really and powerfully? I say powerfully, because whatever else their weekly worship and remembrance of Jesus accomplished, it enabled them form communities that broke down traditional ethnic, cultural, religious, and sociological barriers between Jew and Greek and Roman, rich and poor, men and women, masters and slaves, educated and illiterate, where love and hope and mutuality were the hallmarks of their life together. That was their mission, you see— to embody exactly that sort of new way for human beings to live together.

Master storyteller that he was, the author of Acts, whom we call Luke, shaped his reflections on these questions about the meaning of Jesus' resurrection and his subsequent presence to and with and among the body of believers into a sequential narrative, making the resurrection and the ascension or exaltation of Jesus into two distinct events separated by forty days of "appearances" of the risen Jesus to his followers. He appears to have been very aware of the symbolic significance of the number forty throughout the scriptures— forty days of rain in Noah's flood, forty years of wandering in the Wilderness during the Exodus, forty days in the desert for Elijah, forty days of temptation for Jesus, etc. I doubt he really thought that Jesus went up through the clouds until only his two bare feet could be seen by those below him. Rather it's a storyteller's way of highlighting the importance of two distinct aspects of the one truth. The resurrection and ascension are not two different things, but two different aspects of one reality.

If the Gospels' stories of Jesus' birth tell us of a God who so loved us enough to dignify and hallow our human existence by sharing it—

a truth we call the Incarnation, the Easter stories of Jesus' resurrection and ascension speak to us of our human nature and life being taken up into God. It is the destiny of humanity to be united with God. The ascension says to us that our life matters, and matters infinitely. We may be created from the dust, but we are glorious dust. We may be subject to all the frailties of the flesh, we may suffer and experience pain and suffering, we may hunger and thirst, but we do not suffer hopelessly. The eternal God, the Creator of all that is, has entered our life and has suffered with and for us, and has defeated the power of death so that our life may be taken up into God and we may share in God's own eternal life. St. Athanasius, the fourth-century bishop of Alexandria, put it this way, "God became human, that we might become divine."

This is also the truth St. John reveals in his narrative where he has Jesus pray that beautiful prayer for his followers, not only the original disciples, but all who come to believe through their witness. It's as the risen and ascended Lord that Jesus prays, "*And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name, so that they may be one, even as we are one. . . . As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.*"

The very relationship that Jesus had with God, he now prays that his followers will have. The mission of Jesus becomes the church's mission. There is no longer a great distance between God and human beings; rather there is family intimacy and love, in which we and God are united to one another. The dwelling place of God is among and in the fellowship of God's people. The ascension means that the body of Christ is no longer just the physical body of Jesus of Nazareth, but the universal body of the fellowship of believers among whom Christ dwells through the Holy Spirit. Christ is not "out there" somewhere; he's right here. Together, we are now the Body of Christ. How? Through our

collective and shared memory. When we gather around the Lord's Table and eat and drink together in remembrance of Jesus, those shared memories of the millions of Christians who have gone before us become deeply woven into the fabric of our own lives. Ritual practices, like singing hymns, reading scriptures, eating a symbolic meal together are really memory aids. We are, to a great extent, what we remember.

We can see this same communal memory effect at work in other areas of our lives as well. This American holiday that we call Memorial Day is an example. When we remember the sacrifice of those who gave their lives in service to our country, isn't it a way of reaffirming who we are as Americans? Our celebration of Memorial Day with solemn ceremonies at military cemeteries or joyful rituals like the parade we'll have tomorrow here in Brunswick are not occasions for expressions of jingoistic and misguided patriotism nor merely an excuse for a day off work. On Memorial Day we put aside political or ideological disagreements, because we remember something more basic—our very existence as a nation and the ideals on which our identity is grounded. By officially and ritually remembering the sacrifices that fathers and brothers and uncles and now sisters and mothers as well, we remind ourselves of the costliness of freedom, and of the mission we share to work for the freedom of all human beings everywhere.

So through memory do we Christians reaffirm our identity as the Body of Christ and our mission to manifest the love of God to the world. Together, we are sent into the world, as he was sent into the world, to be the signs of God's future, to be signs of hope when all around us people are falling into despair.

In the summer of 1995, Jim Schmidt, who was pastor at the American Church in London, died of a very aggressive melanoma within four weeks of the diagnosis. It was a real blow to those of us who were his friends and colleagues, and to the members of his congregation.

The following spring, when the international pastors and their spouses met in Berlin for our conference, we gathered one afternoon in the restored Berliner Dom, the great cathedral, in what was formerly East Berlin, to remember Jim, and his connection to our lives. His widow and their eldest son had come back to be present. I was asked to preach at that service, and I was very conscious that, in that particular place, there were layers upon layers of powerful memories. Just a few blocks down the street near the State Opera was the site where the Nazis made a huge bonfire of books they considered dangerous or subversive of fascism. A few blocks in the other direction stood the newly restored synagogue and its reminder of the extermination of six million Jews under that demonic regime. Just across the Unter den Linden, not more than 75 yards from the cathedral stands the building that was formerly the parliament building for the communist government of East Germany. That building, which was the center of control of an ideology that kept millions of people behind a wall, still stands vacant, its materialistic creed in ruins, but in its bronzed mirrored-glass walls, the image of the cathedral dome with the cross on top is reflected. And under that dome, which is topped with a skylight so that the light of heaven may enter, about 70 pastors and their spouses gathered to remember a friend, to share bread and wine together, and to sing, *“This is the feast of the victory of our God. Alleluia.”* The ability to sing such a song of hope, my friends, is what the Ascension of Christ is all about. It is our mission, not by force of arms or economic power, but by the power of our love, to teach the world to sing that song.