

Date: May 8, 2005

SUNDAY: Ascension

SERMON: The Ascension in Real Life

Text(s): Acts 1:1-14; John 17:1-11

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This past Thursday morning, those of us here who have not yet reached that blessed state called retirement probably did what we normally do on Thursday mornings; we went to work. I'm not sure what Thursdays will be like for me after I retire, but I don't have plans to be sitting in front of my computer trying to wrest a sermon from a biblical text as I have done nearly every Thursday for more than thirty years.

However, for millions of people around the world, and particularly all throughout Europe where vestiges of Christendom still remain on the calendars if not necessarily in people's hearts, this past Thursday was a public holiday. Schools were out, banks were closed, many retail stores were closed, and a lot of people took a vacation day on Friday also to make a four-day weekend. Some people, a relative handful, even went to church. Why? Because Thursday was the fortieth day after Easter, celebrated by Christians, at least since the third century, as the Feast of the Ascension of Christ.

Most American Christians, if they celebrate this ancient Christian festival at all, only do it on the Sunday immediately following Ascension Day, as we're doing this morning. Why bother to talk about the Ascension at all? Why not just go with the flow and let this festival be absorbed by our secular substitutes— like Mother's Day to name the most obvious example. The Ascension of Christ certainly doesn't have either the emotional or the marketing power that Mother's Day has for us. Well, I'm going to risk being thought utterly irrelevant or boring and suggest that the Ascension of Christ may have much more to do with our real lives than we normally think.

I'm certainly not the first or the only one to suggest that. St. Augustine, writing in the 4th

century, said it this way, *"This is the festival which confirms the grace of all the festivals together, without which the profitableness of every festival would have perished. For unless the Savior had ascended into heaven, his Nativity would have come to nothing. . . and his Passion would have borne no fruit for us, and his most holy Resurrection would have been useless."*

I probably wouldn't lose money if I were to bet that most of us don't think about the Ascension of Christ at all, much less in the terms Augustine suggests. But, for one day, perhaps, it would do us good to think about the meaning of this truth that we call the Ascension of Christ. We just might discover that it does have real and important meaning for our lives.

It's to St. Luke that we owe the fact that there is a day for celebrating the Ascension at all, and particularly, the practice of doing it on the fortieth day after Easter. The Gospel of Mark never mentions it, while the Gospels of Matthew and John view it as part and parcel of the resurrection of Jesus that we celebrate at Easter. Theologically, that's where it belongs; the Ascension is the extension of the resurrection and a working out of its implications. But it's Luke who gave us the calendar date for the celebration.

For Luke, as for Matthew and John as well, the Ascension of Christ is the key to understanding the mission of the risen Christ through the community of his followers, the church. In our Acts reading this morning (Acts is Volume II of Luke's Gospel), we heard the Risen Jesus saying, *"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses . . . to the ends of the earth."*

And in the long prayer we hear Jesus praying in our gospel lesson from John 17, the same emphasis is heard. Last week, you may remember, I mentioned that in John's gospel, while the narrative proceeds to follow the earthly life of Jesus and his disciples, the voice of Jesus when he speaks is almost always the voice of the Risen and Ascended Christ. This is what makes this gospel sound so mystical and mysterious.

Eternity and time are interwoven so closely we cannot separate them. Here in chapter 17, we hear the voice of the risen and ascended Lord praying for his followers; we might call chapter 17 John's version of the Ascension of Christ.

Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. . .

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 that you have given me, so that they may be one, even as we are one.

There are three things that I hear John saying in this passage that illuminate the meaning of the Ascension for our lives. First, John tells us that God's purpose for the whole enterprise involving Jesus was to give eternal life to human beings. Eternal life, as John understands it, is not primarily a quantitative term. Eternity for John is not time stretched out unendingly; eternal life is not simply life that has no chronological end or that begins after chronological and biological life ends. Eternal life is about a particular kind of life—the life that God has and which God alone can bestow on us. To know God rightly and to be rightly related to God is to be alive in the unique way that God is alive: *“This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”*

As we saw in the passage from John we explored last week, we know God to the extent that we obey the command of Jesus to love one another. So whatever else it means to have eternal life, it is bound up with our loving relationships with other people. As we all know from scores of scientific studies, as well as from personal experience, relationships are essential to life, and even bad and distorted relationships are

better than no relationships at all. We can't survive in isolation. Life without relationships is not really life at all. And life without loving relationships is not eternal life.

Remember the long-running, immensely popular TV series *Cheers*? It was so popular in fact, that it's still running in syndication years after production stopped. Talk about eternal life! Anyway, the setting for the show was a now-famous bar adjacent to the Commons in Boston. The only action was the interaction between the regulars who frequented that bar. I think the clue to why the show was so popular was found in the words of the theme song, which described that bar as “a place where everybody knows your name.” To really be alive, we need to be part of a community where “everybody knows our name.” Isn't it ironic and sad, that in our society, people can often find that sense of belonging and relationship in a bar or in an AA group easier than they can in church? That's why we always need to be paying more attention to how we are becoming a community where everyone is known and loved more than we need to pay attention to how well we preserve our church building or how accurately we forecast our annual budget, or how efficiently our committees operate. Those things are all just tools to help us to truly become a community where the Spirit of the Risen Christ creates bonds of trust, intimacy, caring, and accountability— where we're learning to know each others' names. For only in knowing and being known by one another, can we experience that we are known to, and loved by, God. *“This is eternal life, to know you, the only true God. . .”* It is the ascension of Jesus which makes such intimate knowledge possible. As we hear Jesus pray, *“I am coming to you. . . so that they (that is, my followers) may be one, even as you and I are one.”* Oneness with God experienced through the oneness within the community of Christ's followers is the first meaning of the Ascension of Christ.

In the second place, the ascension of Jesus

tells us that our human nature is sacred. We are not simply animals; we are animals with the potential of divinity. “God became human, so that we might become divine,” said St. Athanasius 1700 years ago. And he was only echoing what we hear the risen Jesus saying here in John’s gospel: “*All mine are yours and yours are mine, and I have been glorified in them.*” The great 20th century theologian Karl Barth, suggests that the Ascension merely changed the vantage point from which Christ operates. He moved from a human place, bound in space and time, as all of us are, to a divine place, but carrying his humanity with him. Thus humanity is now glorified with divinity. Jesus’ glorification is the glorification of all human nature.

This may seem like some mystical and esoteric doctrine, but it has extremely down-to-earth ethical and political consequences. It is precisely because we believe that human nature has been glorified and given eternal worth by the ascension of Jesus, that we can also unequivocally assert the dignity and worth of every human being in the world around us. It is because Jesus is the ascended Lord, who has glorified our humanity, that we cannot allow that sacred humanity to be brutalized by racism or genocide or programs of ethnic cleansing or sexual abuse or gender-discrimination. It’s why we Christians have a mandate to struggle against attitudes or social and political structures and systems that are dehumanizing. Christians may legitimately disagree over the means we use to combat the forces of dehumanization, but that they must be combatted as part of our essential mission as the community of the risen and ascended Lord is clear. We have our marching orders.

Barth went on to say that we cannot leave the task of defending the sacredness of our humanity to governments or armies or political parties. The exaltation of the risen and incarnate Christ, says Barth, “refutes all attempts at setting

up another government, another ‘place’ from where orders and promises would reach us.” (*THE FAITH OF THE CHURCH, P. 98*) Barth wrote those words against the backdrop of the Nazi totalitarianism in Germany, when the German nation, including most of the German church allowed itself to be coopted by the Nazi ideology. Perhaps it’s especially fitting that we are thinking about the ascension of Christ on this 60th anniversary of the end of World War II in Europe, when we are remembering the horrific cost to the world when a whole nation allowed itself to receive its orders and promises from an evil government.

Christians must judge all governments and all economic and political systems and all forms of social engineering on the basis of whether or not they accord to human beings the full dignity and worth that derive from Jesus’ ascension, in which he carried our humanity into the presence of God and glorified it. We measure their success, not by the fact that they seem to work, but by what they do to people— do they honor our humanity or do they degrade it?

Finally, John understands the ascension of Christ as the means by which Jesus’ followers may find security and unity in the world. “Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, that they may be one even as you and I are one.” The risen Jesus was concerned about the security his disciples in a world often hostile to them. We too live in very insecure times. People in every generation feel that they live in insecure times, and they’ve probably been right. Are there any secure times?

We all know what it means to feel insecure. It’s obvious that here in Brunswick we’re insecure about the possibility that the Naval Air Station may close, and if it does, what the consequences for our community would be. Many of us feel insecure about the future we’re leaving to our children or grandchildren, whether we will leave them a stronger, better country than our parents left to us, or whether we’ll leave them a poorer, weaker society. Some of us know the

insecurity when we lose someone near and dear to us, or lose a job or contemplate facing the future after a divorce. Feeling secure just doesn't seem to be a very common experience these days, does it?

Even great saints often feel this way. St. Teresa of Avila, the giant of faith back in 15th century Spain, who brought much needed reforms to the church and whose writings have become spiritual classics, experienced great feelings of insecurity. At one stage, as she was trying to solidify her reforms, she came under fire from jealous colleagues, and she was summoned to appear before the superiors of her order to answer charges that she was teaching heretical things to the nuns under her leadership. On the way, traveling in an open wagon, it began to pour rain, and if it wasn't bad enough getting soaked to the skin, a wheel came off the wagon, throwing her off into the mud. She raised her eyes to heaven and yelled, "God if this is the way you treat your friends, it's no wonder you have so few of them." I reckon we've all had times when we felt the same way, haven't we?

The whole world is looking for security and unity. But security and unity cannot be found in political systems, democratic ideals, military power, social engineering, a rising stock market or technological advances. If those things could produce security and unity, utopia would have arrived long ago. Security and unity can only be found in knowing God in an intimate relationship of love and trust, and we will only know God to the extent that we know one another in such relationships of love and trust. Here, where we gather in the name of Christ who is risen and ascended, where he has promised to be with us; here, when we bear one another's burdens, and care for one another's hurts and watch over one another's souls in love, we will begin to experience that life that is eternal. We will begin to learn to practice the ethics of the Kingdom of Heaven. And as we do, we will begin to experience the security and unity that is the

precious gift—the Good News—that we have to offer the whole world.