

Seventh Sunday in Easter  
May 24, 2020  
The Rev. Jedediah D. Holdorph  
Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Acts 1:6-14  
Psalm 68:1-10, 33-36  
1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11  
John 17:1-11

*Church closed due to COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic: livestream available on Facebook and YouTube.*

The ancient Greeks aspired to get beyond the weight of matter, to live in an ideal realm of pure spirit. (The more things change, the more they stay the same, it seems.) Many religions, and voices perhaps within all religions, teach that life with God can only be attained by being freed from the bonds of earth, from the pull of gravity, from the body. <sup>i</sup>

The Lutheran pastor/preacher Barbara Lundblad recalls a moment from a story that illustrates, in heart-breaking fashion, the beauty and tragedy of the old Greek philosophy.

The story she recalls, written by Mary Gordon, is, at least in part, a tragic love story. Joseph, a Roman Catholic boy, loves Maria, a Jewish girl. Ah, but there's a twist. You see, he's drawn to her religion, and she's drawn to his. But, in the end, his religion proves more attractive to her than he himself is. It's a bitter love triangle.

The moment he knows he's lost her is the day they sneak into the balcony of the convent chapel:

That day in the convent she was far away from him, and knew it, and looked down at him from the lit mountain on whose top she stood, and kept him from the women's voices, rising by themselves into the air, so weightless, neither hopeful nor unhelpful, neither sorrowing nor free from sorrow, only rising, rising without effort above everything that made up life. You never saw the faces of the women who made these sounds that rose up, hovering high above their heads and disappeared. You saw only the light that struck the floor, shot through the blue glass and the red glass of the windows, slowed down, thickened, landing finally as oblong jewels on the wooden floor. He saw Maria rise up on the breaths of the faceless nuns, rise up and leave him, leave the body she loved that did always what she told it, that could dance and climb or run behind him and put cool hands over his eyes and say, "Guess who?" as if it could be someone different. But in the chapel she rose up and wanted to leave the body life that she had loved. Leave him and all their life together. <sup>ii</sup>

It's a heart-breaking moment for the love-struck Joseph.

And heart-breaking, as well, I think, to decide that the "body life that she loved" (as the author puts it) is a thing to leave behind.

At first glance, maybe this sounds like the point of the Ascension of Jesus, from our first reading from Acts this morning:

*... as they were watching, [Jesus] was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.*

Mary Gordon might describe it this way: "Jesus rose up and left the body life he had loved."

But I want to invite us to second-guess that first impression.

It's important, I think, that we acknowledge that we don't conceive of the universe today as people once did. Our world is not flat, with heaven above us and hell below; this "fragile earth, our island home" is round, and it makes no sense to talk about "up" when you live on a globe. (One hemisphere's up is another hemisphere's down; one nation's up is another nation's sideways.)

It's important that we acknowledge how different the world looks to us in modern times. And it's important, I think, to know that the Bible isn't intended to be a science textbook. Maybe people in biblical times thought the world was flat, but that was never the point of the stories they told about God in our midst. A "flat earth" wasn't the point; it was just the setting.

And this story from Acts was never intended as a lesson in cosmology. It intends to break Jesus out of our narrow confines of time and space. In the language of the Creeds, Jesus takes a seat with God, the ruler of heaven and earth. It doesn't describe the moment when Jesus escapes the world; it celebrates the conclusion that Jesus fills the world and all creation.

A couple of verses from one of the great Easter hymns puts it this way:

Christ is alive! No longer bound to distant years in Palestine,  
he comes to claim the here and now and conquer every place and time.

Christ is alive! His Spirit burns through this and every future age,  
till all creation lives and learns his **joy**, his **justice**, **love**, and **praise**.

*Hymnal 1982 – Hymn 182, vv. 3, 5*

So far as I'm concerned, that's the point of the Ascension of Jesus ... that joy and justice and love and praise should fill all creation.

We miss that point if we think the story describes the denigration of our "body life." After all, consider what happens immediately next. The disciples are standing there – mouths wide in amazement, no doubt – and gazing up toward the clouds, when suddenly a couple of angels come along and ask them, "Why do you stand there looking up to heaven?"

Now in fact, given the way the story is told, it seems pretty clear why they're standing there looking wistfully up into the clouds. But the angels get their attention. And in short order, the disciples get their heads out of the clouds and head back down to Jerusalem.

And when they get there, we're told, they devote themselves to prayer.

Our gospel this morning begins with prayer. "Jesus looked up to heaven ..." and he prayed. This image of Jesus at prayer imagines heaven above and the earth beneath.

The Roman Catholic priest and writer John Shea recognizes the potential problem for us, so he invites us to imagine another image: Jesus praying with eyes closed. Looking up to heaven, he says, describe prayer as reaching up to contact God on high, but eyes closed describes prayer as looking for God deep within. Either way, Shea says, "prayer is the explicit attending to the divine that is always present." <sup>iii</sup>

I think about that description of Jesus at prayer – "the explicit attending to the divine that is always present" – when I think about the disciples back in Jerusalem, devoting themselves to prayer like that. They devote themselves to "the explicit attending to the divine that is ... present" back in Jerusalem. Having left the sky full of clouds, they attend to the divine present back in Jerusalem – a city that harbors joy and faith, as well as betrayal and sorrow.

And they devote themselves to "the explicit attending to the divine that is ... present" in a crowded upper room. There are the 11 of them there (the 12 less Judas Iscariot), and other disciples, besides: "certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers." It's a lot of people crammed in what would have been a small room. Nothing like the quiet cloister of a convent, they attend to the divine present in that crowded upper room.

And now I begin to wonder if the point of the Ascension of Jesus has little, if anything, to do with Jesus rising in the sky and everything to do with whether we can explicitly attend to all that is sacred here on earth, wherever we find ourselves and in whatever our circumstances.

Abraham Heschel wrote this about prayer:

To pray is to take notice of the wonder, to regain the sense of the mystery that animates all beings, the divine margin in all attainments. Prayer is our humble answer to the inconceivable surprise of living. It is all we can offer in return for the mystery by which we live. Who is worthy to be present at the constant unfolding of time? Amidst the meditation of mountains, the humility of flowers—wiser than all alphabets—clouds that die constantly for the sake of beauty, *we* are hating, hunting, hurting. <sup>iv</sup>

There is a shrine located on the Mount of Olives, marking the supposed place where Jesus ascended. I've read that the floor exposes a bit of the mountain on which the church rests. A hole in the floor opens to show what is said to be the right footprint of Jesus. (Both footprints were there once, it seems, but one was removed to another shrine in the Middle Ages.) <sup>v</sup>

(Down through ages, religious art has often depicted the scene, showing Jesus rising in the clouds ... and leaving footprints on the ground.)

Perhaps the religious devotion to those footprints is but a sentimental remembrance of the last place Jesus stood before rising up and leaving the “body life he loved” all behind. That bespeaks a certain kind of spirituality that looks wistfully up to heaven, hoping to see Jesus.

But I rather think there’s another option. Even 2,000 years later, perhaps these footprints invite the question the angels ask still: “Why do you stand there looking up to heaven?” (Look down at your feet.)

Or in our case, the angels might ask why people look wistfully at closed church buildings, imagining we’ve been cut off from seeing something sacred locked inside.

I think of the well-known Mary Oliver poem “The Summer Day”:

Who made the world?  
Who made the swan, and the black bear?  
Who made the grasshopper?  
This grasshopper, I mean -  
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,  
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,  
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-  
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.  
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.  
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.  
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.  
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down  
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,  
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,  
which is what I have been doing all day.  
Tell me, what else should I have done?  
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?  
Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?

Footprints at our feet could encourage us to devote ourselves to “the explicit attending to the divine that is always present.” The wonder of footprints on the ground could remind us to look at the world around us for signs of the sacred, perhaps to see God in the midst of our current crisis, maybe in the energy and inspiration people continue to show locally in response to a global pandemic: medical people on the front lines, essential workers in stores, ordinary citizens sewing homemade masks, artists and performers responding with creativity and humor.

We cannot jump high enough to escape to some other world in the sky. Nor should we aspire to do so. We do better if we follow the example of the disciples, devoting ourselves to looking for that which is sacred wherever we are and in all that we do.

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<sup>i</sup> Barbara Lundblad @ [https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf20025f1/footprints\\_on\\_the\\_earth](https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf20025f1/footprints_on_the_earth).

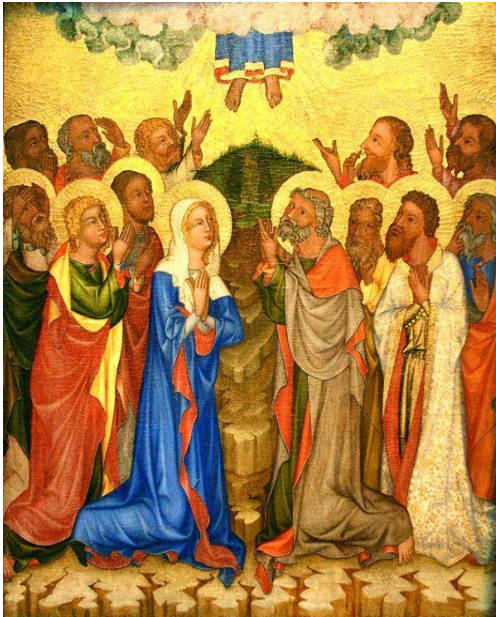
<sup>ii</sup> Mary Gordon, "Temporary Shelter," in *The Stories of Mary Gordon*, p. 288.

<sup>iii</sup> John Shea, Seventh Sunday of Easter, in *On Earth as It Is in Heaven*, pp. 191-192.

<sup>iv</sup> Quoted by Rolf Jacobson @ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5434>.

<sup>v</sup> "Chapel of the Ascension, Jerusalem" @ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chapel\\_of\\_the\\_Ascension,\\_Jerusalem](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chapel_of_the_Ascension,_Jerusalem) -- accessed May 21, 2020.

One example from a quick internet search of religious art for the Ascension of Jesus:



Here's a cropped photo from a church in Spain:

