

The Seventh Sunday of Easter
May 21, 2017
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Acts 1:6-14
Psalm 68:1-10, 33-36
1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11
John 17:1-11

This past Thursday was Ascension Day. I'm guessing the average Episcopalian didn't notice.

It's a peculiar day for us. In theory, it's a major feast day in our church's calendar. In practice, it's passed over most places with hardly anyone noticing.

Partly it's a calendar issue. Ascension Day celebrates what happened on the 40th day of Easter, so it always falls on the Thursday following the Sixth Sunday of our Easter season ... and we hardly ever get a big crowd out to church on a Thursday. I have tried occasionally in the past. When I was in Missouri, we tried to make it a parish event by gathering out on a hill near the church to fly kites, an activity intended to get us to gaze up toward heaven. It didn't work.

Truth be told, I'm guessing that most clergy are not quite sure what to make of the story and we're tempted to let it pass, hoping the average Episcopalian won't notice. And more often than not, you wouldn't. But this year, it's the first thing we hear about in our reading from Acts.

It's not so easy to talk about ascension in the modern age. We don't believe in a three-story universe, with heaven above us and hell below. We live in an age when any child can look at a globe of the earth and ask who decided that the North Pole should be on the top. And what, after all, constitutes "up" when the earth is round? I remember standing in the checkout line at a grocery store once and picking up a copy of the *Weekly World News* purporting to show pictures of heaven as seen, if I remember correctly, by the Hubble telescope. But most of us knew it was all a hoax, didn't we? I don't think many still believe that if we could get into a space ship and travel far enough, we'd reach a place called "heaven."

Last year, during Lent, some of us read Diana Butler Bass' book *Grounded*. The central point of her book was that modern people everywhere are rejecting what she describes as the "vertical theology" of our inherited faith, dissatisfied with anything that speaks of God as high and distant in a heaven far removed from this earth. Our world, she says, is in the midst of a spiritual revolution that finds God on the horizons of nature and human community and discovers the sacred everywhere in the world around us and within us. She makes a compelling case. And I'm not inclined to disagree with her fundamental point here this morning.

And yet if we're going to get something out of today's readings, I think we're going to have to find something in the "up/down" metaphor that works for us still. Conversationally, we really do still use the language of up and down in ways that make sense. Depression is like being weighed down. In life, there are those who must overcome challenges that hold them down. Unfair criticisms are put-downs. If we want to be helpful to someone down and out, we might offer not a handout but a leg up. All this "up" and "down" way of speaking is metaphorical.

So, too, if you were to write a spiritual autobiography and recount some of the highpoints and refer them as “mountaintop” experiences, they wouldn’t all be somewhere in the Cascades. Motivational speakers and posters tell us to “shoot for the stars,” never intending we think of a career with NASA.

More to our point this morning, on the Seventh Sunday of Easter, we go back to Easter Sunday. We all know that story. James Lemler, one-time dean of the Episcopal seminary in Chicago, retells the story this way:

Everything had been thrown against him. Everything had worked to silence him. Indeed they held him down. They nailed him down. They murdered him. But ... they could not, they could not keep him down. He rose from that grave and brought life to the very place where there had been death and only death before.ⁱ

Jim Lemler sums it up with the refrain from a song: “You can’t keep a good man down.” I have a priest friend who, for his Easter sermon 20 years ago, picked up on a popular song of the day by a band called Chumbawamba. The refrain of that song: “I get knocked down, but I get up again / You’re never gonna keep me down.”

And the great affirmation of Easter, of course, is “Alleluia. Christ is risen.”

We go one step further this morning. Ascension is less, if anything, to do with Jesus defying gravity than with an insistence that it’s not just the Roman Empire that couldn’t hold Jesus down on Easter; there is absolutely nothing that can keep Jesus tied down and confined to any time or place. One of our Easter hymns is spot on, and especially *apropos* for Ascension:

Christ is alive! Let Christians sing.
The cross stands empty to the sky.
Let streets and homes with praises ring.
Love, drowned in death, shall never die.

Christ is alive! No longer bound
to distant years in Palestine,
but saving, healing, here and now,
and touching every place and time.

Not throned above, remotely high,
untouched, unmoved by human pains,
but daily, in the midst of life,
our Savior with the father reigns.

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. 1-3, 5

All of which is to say that we miss the point if we think this is Jesus finding a way to get back into heaven and away from us here. We're looking in the wrong place entirely – and this is a point I think Diana Butler Bass would heartily agree with ... we're looking in the wrong place entirely if we imagine that our job is to toil away here on earth until we someday find our escape, our eyes fixed in the meantime on seeking Jesus and God and heaven up in the skies.

There's that wonderful moment in our reading from Acts this morning. Jesus has been lifted up and lost in the clouds. And the disciples just stand there – mouths wide open in amazement no doubt – gazing up toward heaven. And suddenly a couple of angels come along and ask them, "Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" It's more than a little evocative of Easter morning when two angels suddenly came along and ask the women in the tomb, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen" (Luke 24:5).

And in both cases, I think there's a not-so-subtle rebuke that we've missed the point if we fail to see that both Easter and Ascension connect Jesus to life in our here and now. Both times, the angels exhort us to get back into the world where God is and where we have work to do.

It's easy for me to see how we might listen in on Jesus' prayer in this morning's gospel and imagine that it's all pretty other-worldly, but it's not. No, not really. Jesus looks up to heaven and he prays about "eternal life." But as he defines it here – and nowhere else in the whole of the Bible is "eternal life" ever so clearly defined -- "eternal life" isn't a place or time apart from here and now. It's knowing God and knowing Jesus. And Jesus' prayer is that those of us who already know God and live in this world will share what we know with a world that doesn't yet know or trust that, as the Easter hymn put it, "love, drowned in death, shall never die."

Ascension Day was hardly noticed when it came and went this past week. Maybe it all seemed too remote. In a remote corner of our Diocese, it occurs to me, a few hundred miles away from here, our church camp and conference center is called Ascension School. There's a happy coincidence there, for surely part of the church camp's mission is to invite all who come there to pay attention to the God who is alive and available to us in "every place and time."

I'll close with an old story-poem that tells about what Ascension – the major feast day or the church camp – might have to each any child of God – young or old – who is open to its lessons.

He was just a little boy,
on a week's first day,
wandering home from Bible school,
and dawdling on the way.

He scuffed his shoes into the grass;
he found a caterpillar.
He found a fluffy milkweed pod,
and blew out all the 'filler.'

A bird's nest in a tree overhead,
so wisely placed up high,
was just another wonder
that caught his eager eye.

A neighbor watched his zig zag course,
and hailed him from the lawn;
Asked him where he'd been that day,
and what was going on.

'I've been to Bible School,' he said,
and turned a piece of sod.
He picked up a wiggly worm replying,
'I've learned a lot about God.'

'M'm very fine way,' the neighbor said,
'for a boy to spend his time.'
'If you'll tell me where God is,
I'll give you a brand new dime.'

Quick as a flash the answer came!
Nor were his accents faint.
'I'll give you a dollar, Mister,
if you can tell me where God ain't.'

ⁱ James Lemler @ http://day1.org/1092-you_cant_keep_a_good_man_down.