

THE ASCENSION – JESUS IS ALWAYS WITH US

I'm afraid the story of Jesus' Ascension into heaven always amuses the cynical side of me. I remember on a trip to the Holy Land a few years ago we were in the pretty little Chapel of the Ascension on top of the Mount of Olives, the traditional site of Jesus' ascension into heaven. In fact in this week's "Highlights at St. Mary's" there's a beautiful photo of the chapel taken by our own David Crosson on his and Natalie's recent trip to the Holy Land. When we were there the guide somberly pointed out a large indentation in the rock, that he said was the mark Jesus' feet left before he ascended. Kind of like a rocket launch at Cape Kennedy – whoosh! Or a massive high jump! I think the guide was offended when I snickered.

You've probably seen medieval paintings of the Ascension, with Jesus' feet sticking out of a puffy white cloud. That of course presupposes the old 3-story view of the universe, with the flat earth in the middle, Hades or hell below, and heaven above.

We speak in metaphors all the time, don't we. We talk about the sun rising and setting, and yet we know it's the earth that's turning while the sun stands still. We talk about going to the ends of the earth, but we know that the earth is round and doesn't have any ends. Marcus Borg pointed out that to express great truths like the virgin birth, the resurrection, the ascension, we think in metaphors. The trouble comes when we literalize the metaphor. And to me one of the lessons from the story of the Ascension is – don't literalize the metaphor. (Do you know that God is left-handed? That's because Jesus is sitting on his right hand.)

Calling something a metaphor doesn't mean it isn't true. I believe the biblical story of the Ascension of Jesus is true and does have something profound and important to say to us 21st century space age creatures.

This is graduation season. Many of us have family or friends who are graduating right about now. Our 5-year-old grand-twins just graduated from transitional kindergarten. And it was a big deal. Graduation means baccalaureate and valedictory

addresses, goodbyes, the bittersweet feeling of moving on to something new and exciting yet reluctant to leave behind the security of the known.

The Ascension of Jesus is kind of like a graduation for the disciples. As long as Jesus was physically present with them, his followers could hang on to the idea that the kingdom of God that Jesus spoke about was an earthly political kingdom, what Israel had expected for hundreds of years. They even asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” They were expecting another King David, who would ride in on a white horse and rid the Israelites of the hated Roman occupiers. Once they were freed from the “King Jesus Syndrome”, once Jesus had ‘ascended’ and left their world of time and space, they were forced into carrying out his mission themselves. Once you graduate and no longer sit at the feet of your teacher, you have to go out and do it yourself.

I think of Jesus as kind of like a spiritual piñata – he bursts his earthly bounds, and like the goodies inside, his presence spreads to the ends of the earth. (To us a metaphor!) Jesus in effect says to us, now I have no hands and feet but yours, no ears and mouth but yours. You have to be me in the world.

Isn't that the function of any good teacher? To lead us into the subject, inspiring us and encouraging us and answering questions for a while, until we demonstrate our proficiency, pass the exam, and continue to learn and grow and do it on our own. That's what Jesus wants of his followers – to grow under the guidance of the Spirit and take responsibility for our own lives. Except that Jesus is still with us – we don't leave him behind like a beloved teacher, only to see at reunions. Jesus, the risen and ascended Christ, is within each of us. He lives! He lives!

When you think of it, Jesus is more present today than he was when he walked the earth 2000 years ago. We've all probably wished at some point that we could have been there with the disciples to see and hear and touch Jesus in the flesh. But you know what? The disciples were there, they knew him in the flesh, but they didn't have a clue who he really was and what he was about. They all ran off and deserted him at the hour of his death. It was only after the experience of his resurrection that they finally recognized who Jesus was, the fullness of God in human flesh.

When Jesus walked the earth he was human, fully human. As a human Jesus was limited like you and me to one place at one time. After his resurrection and ascension Jesus is no longer subject to our human limitations of space and time. Jesus is present today – in you, in me, in the homeless and the refugee, in everyone we meet, everywhere. In the created universe, and in the bread and the wine.

The story of the ascension, like the resurrection, is a way of expressing the inexpressible – that Jesus has broken out of the bonds of time and space, that now he lives in the realm of God and is everywhere present, like the air, like love, and that he promises to be with us forever. Sometimes the only way to express the inexpressible is with metaphor and poetry. Christ is with us, all of us, in a new and inner way. As Jesus says at the end of Matthew’s Gospel, “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

So -- do you believe that? Deep down in your heart, do you really believe that Christ is with us today, here? I know I sometimes have trouble believing that Jesus who I can’t see is with me, especially when things aren’t going the way I would like them. During times of discouragement, times of feeling alone or anxious or afraid, we need to remind ourselves that Jesus promises us, promises us, that he is with us – always, everywhere, even to the end of the world. He never goes away. When we suffer, he suffers with us. And when we rejoice, he rejoices with us.

I kept on my desk for years a plaque that says “I refuse to gratify the devil by becoming discouraged.” No matter how discouraging things seem to be, no matter how bleak, Jesus is still here with us. That’s Jesus’ promise at the Ascension. “I will not leave you comfortless.” “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Christ is with us. Hope is with us. Joy is with us. And it’s Jesus who gives us that joy.

Last weekend at our parish retreat at the Bishop’s Ranch we talked a lot about joy, the kind of joy that’s best described as the peace that passes all understanding. In fact, the kids went all over the Ranch with buckets filling them with things that brought them joy – including things like flowers and frogs. Joyful things. Stevo Gamboa put it very simply – “to know joy is to know God.”

We may not always recognize the form that this joy takes, but Christ is telling us, “Stop worrying. Be not afraid. God is in charge. I am with you, always, even to the end of the age.

Today’s Collect, the prayer for the day, sums it up beautifully: Jesus ascended far above all heavens that he might fill all things, and abide with us forever. Let’s be like the disciples, who as the Gospel tells us, returned to Jerusalem with great joy. Go, and be Jesus’ witnesses in the world today, knowing he is with us to the end.