

Feast of the Ascension 2024
St. Clare's Episcopal Church
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We are celebrating the Feast of the Ascension this morning. It is a feast that is based on our reading today from Acts and is commemorated 40 days after Easter. That's really last Thursday, 10 days before Pentecost, which is 50 days after Easter. It is one of the Principal feasts in our church and that's why we've transferred it to today, and is an ancient celebration.

The Feast of the Ascension is not a feast that's widely known in this country, perhaps because of the strong Protestant influence in the founding of our country. However, it's a big deal in the Orthodox traditions and in most Catholic countries, although it is waning. And it really is a strange kind of thing. Google turned up even stranger ideas about the Ascension: eat a bird since Jesus went up into the sky like a bird – it will bring you good luck; candles and beans and grapes, and other first fruits were blessed on this day; it used to be celebrated throughout Europe, mostly as a bank holiday but again it's waning; a three-day procession with candles torches and banners; an all-night vigil; hiking to the top of a hill; chasing the devil through the streets, dunking the devil in a pond or burning an effigy of the devil; placing eggs in the roof because eggs laid on Ascension never go bad; clouds were said to form in the shape of a lamb; catch crickets and have them sing to you; and the list continues.

Celebratory traditions aside, it is a strange concept. We have words to describe the birth of Jesus – babies are born every day; words to describe the death of Jesus – people die every day, even violent deaths; the resurrection is more of a challenge, but even there we can find metaphors to help us – death springing to life from winter to spring, the caterpillar reborn into a butterfly. But the Ascension is just strange, the stuff of science fiction. In Acts, the resurrected Christ is talking to his disciples, they're asking him if the time has come to restore the kingdom to Israel and he is whisked away into a cloud. Just like the garden scene at the resurrection, two men dressed in white are there with an explanation. They tell Jesus's followers to stop gazing at the sky (I think that's a challenge given how odd it is), but they're told to stop gazing and return to Jerusalem where they are to wait for the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The Ascension is an event that our ancestors struggled to make sense of and to express in words, and they struggled with it because they thought it mattered. John Calvin has this to say: "At the Ascension, our humanity, our flesh has been taken by God's Beloved One into the very heart of God. This is profound good news for us as Christians and for the whole world. It means that we are more deeply valued, loved and held by God than we may have known before."

Deeply valued, loved and held by God, more so than we could ever have known before. Julian of Norwich, whose feast day was last Wednesday, said something similar: We are created by God; we are loved by God; we are held by God. And Julian had this visions amidst deep turmoil in her world: extreme famine, a pandemic that lasted 100 years, and wars raging. She lived in a time when there was deep mistrust of God who was surely punishing the world, and that natural world which wasn't supplying food.

The overall message here is that all of our experiences, all of our sufferings and joys,

have been taken into the heart of God by Jesus, and we are more deeply valued, loved and held by God than we can ever imagine. No wonder so many interesting traditions evolved around the celebration of the Ascension – it touches and blesses all of life.

The Ascension is a celebrated event in the life of the Eastern Christian church because it is nothing less than the creation of a new reality for the world. Jesus is lifted up like Elijah and the event declares a new community and a new power in the world. God's rule of mercy, compassion, forgiveness, and caring is enthroned for the governance of the world. Jesus is forever merged with God and we can no longer see the Divine without seeing Jesus - he becomes part of our sense and understanding of the divine life. The power that Jesus promises at the Ascension, the Holy Spirit, is the power to breathe in the breath of God, to receive the intimacy Jesus has with the Father as our own intimacy with God. The promise of this new power is that each of us can have a loving relationship with Abba God, mother and father to us all. And to know God, says Jesus in our Gospel lesson today, is eternal life.

Jesus tells the disciples that eternal life is gained by knowing God and this knowing God is the key to who we are. Our identity, then, is not that which separates us from one another – our uniqueness - but that which binds us to one another. Our identity is derived by our creation, preservation and all the blessings of this life. When we are in relationship with God, it is this relationship which gives us life.

Knowing God and participating in eternal life, especially in the Gospel of John, is bound up with life incarnate, life in the flesh lived in the here and now. Eternal life is not a future experience that we work to gain entry to after we finish this life. Inherent in the notion of eternal life is an invitation to begin enjoying life abundant today. And through the Passion – the death, resurrection and ascension - life as we know it in this world is blessed and called “good,” because God participates fully.

This morning, we celebrate our two high school graduates, Lily Harkins and Benton Gregory. They are in transition, as are their families – parents, siblings, and grandparents. For them, the Ascension is the promise that life in this world is blessed by God and that we – you two – no matter what homesickness you may experience in the coming year, what difficulties you may face – you have not been left alone. Jesus has taken those experiences and all of the realities of living in this world with him to God and made us one with God. And Jesus promises us the gift of the Holy Spirit, so when you are having a rough time, stop and breathe in the breath of God. And when you experience the joy that you will have in becoming adults, know that God celebrates with you.

And for all of the mothers here today, know that God created, loves and holds all of our children and they are ever beloved of God.

Blessings and love to you both. We hold you here at St. Clare's in prayer and in spirit as you go forth in the name of the Lord. Amen.