

Sermon: “Ascension Paradoxes”*

Acts 1: 6-14; John 17: 6–19

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“Many Christians know that deadly moment at a party when their friends realize they actually believe something everyone [else] has merrily been belittling.” So writes the biblical scholar Luke Timothy Johnson at the beginning of his study of the Apostles’ Creed. “They [the Christians] recall their stammered reassurances (‘Oh, it’s all right; I wasn’t offended’); their tortured reinterpretations (‘I’m sure that’s not what you *meant!*’); their relief when the conversation moves on (‘whew! Glad that’s over!’); their self-contempt (‘how can I be so stupid?’).” Thinking about, or remembering, such reactions, this “embarrassment at being seen as believers,” helps us to see that even today, even modern Christians living comfortably in peaceful societies may have a sense of being at odds with the world. Our own occasional discomfort perhaps gives us a glimmer of the distress that the followers of Jesus would have felt as they faced the challenge of living in a world without Jesus. What was going to happen to them? How would they live with the crushing disappointment? Would they now be ostracized and alienated from their world, or would they actually be persecuted? And what would happen *then* to the community that was just emerging as the church of Jesus Christ?

Today is a significant day in the church year; significant, but also complicated. It is a day of paradoxes, and one of those paradoxes has to do with endings and beginnings. As the Seventh Sunday of Easter, it brings the church’s season of Easter to a close. As the Sunday after Ascension, it marks the end of the the story of Jesus’s resurrection; the end, in fact, of the story of Jesus’s entire life on earth. But it also points to a new beginning.

The ending of things can quite naturally be sorrowful; one of the commentaries I looked at this week quoted a reflection that tried to capture how Peter might have responded to the departure of Jesus from his life:

* This sermon text is provided as a help to listeners with hearing or language difficulties, as well as others who are interested. It is not intended as a fully-documented publication — and it may differ from the sermon as preached.

Never again [Peter might have said],
Never again, Jesus,
shall we break bread together in this world.
Never again will You teach me to fish on Galilee.
Never again will I go walking on water with You.
Never again will You wash my feet.
Never again will You greet me from the dawn lit shore.
Never again will You sleep in my boat,
oblivious seemingly to the wind and waves.

For those of us who have known sorrow and loss, these words may seem both wrenching and familiar. And yet Jesus's departure points to a new beginning, for Peter and all of his companions will know Jesus in a new way. Or, as Peter might put it:

And yet always You are and will be with us,
not as past memory, but as present tense and future hope. . . .
We shall know You as the Scriptures burn within us.
We shall touch You in the neighbour that we love.
We shall hear You in the silence when we pray.
We shall see You when bread is broken and wine outpoured.

One way to look at Ascension is that it brings the resurrection to completion. In the 40 days between Easter and the Ascension, Jesus has been completing his work. On the road to Emmaus, he explains Scripture to his wayward followers one last time. He celebrates Eucharist, breaking bread with his Emmaus traveling companions. Telling the fishermen to cast their nets one last time and inviting them to share fish on the beach, he reminds them one last time of the miracle of the abundance of God's kingdom. He selects Peter to be a shepherd to his flock: "Do you love me," he asks; then feed my sheep. And in leaving the "disciple whom Jesus loved" with the others, he promises that love will remain in the church until he returns.

With Ascension, the story of Jesus's earthly life comes full circle, from his birth into the world to his departure from it. A larger circle surrounds the circle of his earthly life: the Son leaves the Father, humbles himself, and becomes one of us.

But now at the Ascension, he returns to God the Father — and takes up again his role in the life of God.

Yet this ending, this completion, is also a new and unexpected beginning. Resurrection, writes Luke Timothy Johnson, means not only that Jesus is no longer among the dead but also that “he now lives with God’s own life and power.” I like to think about what it would mean for Jesus to return to God bringing all of his human life, all that he has seen and heard and felt and comprehended, back into the life of God with him. In Luke Timothy Johnson’s words, far from being a mere resuscitation, or return to mere mortal life, the resurrection and ascension enable “Jesus’s entry as a human person into the immortal existence of God. This is, indeed,” says Johnson, “a ‘new creation’.”

“In the end is the beginning,” in the words of one of our hymns. And that is one of today’s paradoxes. But with the ascension also comes a new way in which Jesus is present in the world. Jesus’s followers feel the resurrection not as a past event but as a present reality that they are living every day. Although no longer present in this world, Jesus has nevertheless become present to his followers more fully and powerfully than ever before. His physical absence enables his new, powerful, enlivening presence, and that presence *requires* his physical absence. And that is a paradox too.

All of these marvellous doings are swirling in the air around the disciples for whom Jesus prays in this morning’s beautiful reading from the Gospel of John. (We might say that these things are above their heads.) They have gathered together for one last meal. Jesus has washed their feet, and he has given them a new commandment, that they love one another. In a few moments he will lead them out into a nearby garden, where he will be betrayed and arrested. But now, for a moment, he pauses over his disciples. And he prays.

His prayer for his disciples is a promise and a hope for all those who seek to follow Christ. Scholar David Lose, whose insights I have drawn on before, notes three key elements in this prayer. First: “The world can be a difficult place.” This hardly seems like good news, but at least it is the truth about the world. It’s important, Lose writes that, “church be a place where we can stop pretending and tell each other the truth. This life is at turns beautiful and difficult, wonderful and painful. Jesus knows that his departure will prove immensely challenging for

his disciples, and he does not sugarcoat that but instead tells them the truth." The community of Christ should be a place where the truth can be told.

Secondly, "Christianity does not provide an escape from life's difficulties, but rather offers support to flourish amid them." Jesus does not ask to take the disciples out of the world, to spring them from their difficulties. How much they would have preferred that! No; he asks only that the Father "protect them from the evil one." In praying that God protect his disciples from "the evil one," Jesus points to a deep Christian faith that gives people "the ability to keep [their] footing amid the tremors" that continue to shake the world. This is the promise that Jesus makes his disciples then and now: not that they are exempt from struggle, but that they are not alone in those struggles.

Finally, Jesus's prayer tells his followers, then and now, that "We are here for a purpose: to care for this world God loves so much." Nine times in this passage we read the word "given." It is a theme of John's gospel: everything that we have is given by God. What is *given* in this passage? Just about everything: "The disciples' identity as those given by God to Jesus as precious; knowledge of God as loving parent; the word of truth about God's love for the world; and, particularly, the realization that they are those persons who have been chosen and sent into the world to make a difference."

To my mind, one of the most touching, but also one of the most challenging elements of Jesus's prayer in our lonely and argumentative age is his plea that his followers be one. "Protect them in your name that you have given me," Jesus says, "so that they may be one, as we are one," so that none of them may be lost. What does it take to work at "being one" even when we disagree about things that we think are vitally important? The life of God, the Holy Trinity, is said by some to resemble a dance of aspects or faces or manifestations of God that are the same, yet distinct. So may it be for us in the church, as we lean in to those things that we share, and bear with patience our disagreements.

On this seventh Sunday of Easter, this Ascension Sunday, let us give thanks for the mysterious, grand, and lovely ways of God, that brought Christ into our world to care for us and redeem us, and brought him out of the world to rejoin the Father, gracing us with truth, sustenance, and purpose. Amen.