

The Church of the Pilgrimage  
Rev. Dr. Helen Nablo  
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Luke 24:44-53

He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.

### **Making Space**

So I will be honest, very honest. The Ascension, this idea of Jesus going on up into the sky, would hardly be high on my list of favorite scripture stories. It's kind of weird, first and second, it plays into the idea that God and things spiritual are up there... away from here, away from earth.

Did you notice a tension in our call to worship and our prayer of confession today? The first says we don't need to look up and away for God, God is right here, inhabiting our world, and dwelling with us. Then the prayer spoke a yearning, to be lifted beyond this world's occasional craziness, the soul sucking demands of life here in this world, to live above that, and therefore more fully above, with God. So which is it? Here, or there? Up or down?

I steadfastly avoided preaching on the Ascension for years, though I note that the lectionary had this same text landing on Mother's Day last year, and it was our text for the day then too. Seems the pastors hardened heart has softened a bit towards the Ascension. What I now find interesting is what the Ascension meant to the early church, as the followers of Jesus sought to be God's people with this story somehow putting a needed perspective to things.

So I'd like to begin this morning with a little something on the liturgical year. Some of you know lots about this. Others of you not so much. The liturgical year wasn't something that Jesus decreed, say when he was delivering the Sermon on the Mount. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God, and blessed are those who follow the church calendar. No, the liturgical year emerged over time, as the church was being the church. It was a way of understanding time that followed the story of God at work in Jesus Christ, and it was different than the secular calendar.

So, let's start with how the church year ends. It ends not with New Year's Eve, that is the secular calendar, but with the Reign of Christ: the last Sunday before Advent begins, it is often Thanksgiving weekend. The Reign of Christ is a day for remembering that though earthly leaders may thunder their threats, in the end Jesus holds the power that is true, that is trustworthy, that is life-giving. He is the King who is also the Good Shepherd, who tends the flock with love and compassion for all.

The very next Sunday after that is the start of the new year: Advent. It is a season for watching and waiting, as we prepare our hearts for Jesus coming, for the incarnation. It really isn't all about Christmas day, the day named for Jesus birth, but rather about what it means that God loved us so much that God wanted to dwell in human flesh alongside us.

After Advent and Christmas comes Epiphany, when we read about the wise men and the star, and wonder about all that is wondrous, about all that is gift, about those times in our lives when something new comes into our lives, when we see more clearly than we've ever seen before. Epiphanies come in long beach walks, and in children's births and in church's realizing that they are called to do real, concrete things to follow Jesus.

After Epiphany, Ordinary time (more on that later) and sometime after Epiphany, Lent. Lent, a season not just about sin and sorrow, but about waiting for something good to emerge out of the midst of great difficulty; Lent is about preparing ourselves for joy. It is also about pondering the deeper challenges of following Jesus. You could say Lent culminates in Easter, the day of Resurrection, but really it, Easter, is a step along the way. For what good is it if Jesus rises, if we too do not rise? So the days that follow Easter (Jesus is back) lead to the Ascension (Jesus departs) which lead to Pentecost (when the spirit came, also known as "the birthday of the church") – which, by the way, we will celebrate next week. Trying to get this across in a sermon makes me think we should have an adult education class on this sometime. A chart would come in handy.

Ordinary Time – I said I would say something about that. Well, this week when my husband Mike had a detached retina and had to lay on his side (for four more days, counting today) to keep his retina in place, to keep his vision healing, well, that felt like ordinary time. Not all that much that was big was going on, and yet in his eyeball there certainly was a lot that was very important, though very hidden, going on. In ordinary time we know that God walks with us even when our lives are not in the midst of waiting, or new birth, or difficulty, or new life, or surprising spirit filled moments.

God is in the regular rhythms of sleeping, waking, working, resting. In time ordinary time gives way to the Reign of Christ, the end of the church year, and another Advent full of promise and waiting upon the promise. This is how the ancient church ordered time, made meaning, gained perspective.

The liturgical year, and I hope I have done it some justice here today, is about God with us all the time. It is about our having different seasons in our individual lives, in our spiritual lives, in our life together as a church. The liturgical year reminds us, lest we be tempted to forget, that nothing stands still for very long. Life is not static, and it is a spiritual challenge to perceive, to accept, and to adapt. The liturgical year, if it has its way with us, reminds us that we are not in control. And though that is often hard for us, it is the way life is.

So back to the Ascension. When Jesus first returned to the disciples, showing up by the tomb, and then later on the Emmaus road, showing up in a locked room, and most fun of all at a seaside fish fry--well, you can bet the disciples wanted to hold onto him forever. You can bet they didn't like it very much when he started talking about leaving them again, even if there was this vague and confusing talk about the Spirit coming to help them out.

In thinking about this day, the Ascension, it's helpful to realize that it is not so much about the physical act, Jesus going up, even if that is to be reunited with God, the Source. Rather, as one commentator says, "it is about making space so that the mission of the church can begin. So long as God was in the world in human form, all eyes and hearts were fixed there. Jesus ascension makes space for the disciples to turn their gaze to the world, where God will indeed reveal God." (*Feasting on the Word*, Year B, volume 2, David Cunningham, p. 522)

Much is made this day about helicopter parents, those who cannot let their kids out of their sight for long, those who, by overparenting, or by parenting too vigorously for too long, are not permitting their kids to become fledglings, to fly and soar. Jesus is not a helicopter teacher, a helicopter savior if you prefer those words – and the Ascension is how we know that.

This week I found myself walking a lot. The earth has come alive, and walking has become a feast for the eyes. But as I walked, I thought about how my six years with you all has been personally marked by the death of both of my beloved parents. I have learned so much – about them, about myself, about how to live and love and let go. And I've come to realize something. I don't really feel like I am "orphaned." Those words may work for you, and I can respect that, but they don't really work for me. I do feel more that sense of standing on my own. I do feel it is pretty weird to be the oldest living generation in the family. But orphaned when you've had your parents as long as I had mine feels overly harsh. It's more like a strange new landscape....and wondering what it means to now be the ones who carry on the family ways.

So I am walking along Warren avenue on Friday and this little boy about five or six was playing with his mother and his toy dinosaur, bouncing the dinosaur along a stone wall. I stopped and said "Wow, is that a Velociraptor?" "It is" the boy said. "That is pretty scary looking" I said.

"I mean I would not want to meet that guy on the street." "I would" the boy said. "Really!" I said. "If you met him, wouldn't you be scared of that mouthful of teeth?" "No," he said "If he was bothering me, I'd take some pliers and pull his teeth out!"

I laughed out loud and thought "now there is a boy with a sense of his own agency!" Excuse me, Mr. Velociraptor, please hold on while I remove your fearsome teeth.

When Jesus left his disciples, he wanted them not to be afraid. He wanted them to have a sense of their own agency. Not that it was all on them, that they had to go it all on their own. There was going to come a Spirit, a force, a power that would guide them day to day, that would equip them for the work they had to do. But they didn't need to cower in the upper room, giving themselves over to fear and they didn't need for one minute to think it was all over. Jesus absence was going to make space - space for the coming of the spirit and for their gaze to turn -- from their departing savior to the world around them, to the ways that God was gifting and blessing them even still.

So, the question isn't where did Jesus go, and why did he leave us? It is how can we honor him? How can we in the living of our lives, spirit blessed, help show others who Jesus is, and how grand and glorious his love is?

I think the same is true for us when we think on those in our lives who have loved us, mentored us, helped us be who we are. Perhaps they are still on this earth, and hopefully then they know how to make space for us to move into the fullness of our being. Perhaps they are not here among the living, in which case they are rooting for us, in that great company of the saints.

Recently I was talking with Rosemary MacKay – she had been asking how I was doing in these days of bereavement. I don't know if many of you can relate to this, but I had for several months leading up to my dad's death, been having a serious craving for a dog. And not just a dog, but a *puppy*. Rosemary said, hmmm very interesting. Rosemary said, why don't you let there be a little space in your life? Why don't you take a year and see, rather than trying to fill things up so quickly? if you still want a puppy, there will be a puppy. But maybe there is something else you want with that time and energy. Can you make space to let it unfold?

The answer to those questions is yes, I can...but there are days I'd rather fill up the space, even if it means chewed up shoes and puddles on the floor and additional chaos...because space in our lives isn't always easy to live with.

The Ascension is about this wise teaching: that space being made in our lives is something to notice and honor. The Ascension is about the holy, powerful, Spirit of God that will surely come to us and move us enliven us in due time. It's about absence, and presence – and this being part of the rhythm of our lives.

May we learn well this wisdom. May we believe that when space is made, particularly when we await God's movement, new life and new purpose will indeed unfold. Amen.