

The Church of the Pilgrimage
Rev. Dr. Helen Nablo
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Acts 1:6-14

Then they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven." Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day's walk from the city. When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.

A Significant Pause

The Ascension calls up a memory of a day, when early in my time here at this church I went to visit a man who had recently lost his wife. I had never met him before. His wife's death and the funeral happened in the month before I got here. But in our conversation, this man got right to it. He told me that he'd visited his wife's grave, had visited it many times in fact. But each time he did not feel her presence there. "Where is she now?" he wondered out loud.

That man was Craig Campbell and he died recently at the age of 100. In between that first meeting and the time of his death I had other visits with him, other times to reflect with him some upon life and loss and it is fair to say that eventually Craig answered his own question. Margie was with him in great memories, and in their children – but most of all she was in his heart. The question "Where is she now?" -- so painful at first -- kind of answered itself over time.

There is a kind of parallel with the first disciples and with the early church, though the issue was perhaps less about immediate grief and more about purpose going forward. Post resurrection, the disciples were very concerned with where Jesus was. If he was not in the grave, and also no longer walking about on earth, then *where was he?*

The Ascension located Jesus in heaven, seated on the throne on the right hand side of God. We might get caught up in the strangeness of Jesus mode of departure, but the Ascension is more about locating Jesus than it is about how he got there. And while we in the Protestant tradition haven't always made much of the Ascension,

maybe today we really could – for there is something here to ponder, and something here to celebrate.

The first celebratory element comes in the transition that the Ascension marks: for Jesus departing gives disciples something to do. One mighty act of God (the Resurrection, then the Ascension) is going to lead to another – to Pentecost, but meanwhile the disciples are to stay together, wait and pray. Theologian Karl Barth called this time between Jesus earthly departure and the Spirit coming on the day of Pentecost “the significant pause” -- for staying together, waiting and praying are not nothing – they are, in fact, activities of faith that presume in time God will act, and things will happen.

You could say the Ascension is the first part of empowerment, and the men who speak to the disciples put it that way. Why do you stand here looking into heaven? they ask. Don't you know there is better use of your time? Don't you know there is work to do?

We might go so far as to say Jesus departure creates a needed void. It makes real a prayer, often attributed to Teresa of Avila:

Christ has no body on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which the compassion of Christ must look out on the world. Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good. Yours are the hands with which he is to bless his people.

If the Ascension makes possible this empowering effect, it also brings about an *equalizing* effect. This had not occurred to me until recently, when I read an article in Sojourners magazine by a man named Samuel Son. Son pointed out that whereas it is the nature of any organization to centralize, to connect a land and a language to its founder, to make the leaders birth and burial places holy grounds requiring pilgrimages, Christianity at its beginning did not do this. Jesus absence, his going away if you will, and the church's strong affirmation of that kept the church from centralizing around Jerusalem, and was largely why the faith had such a missionary zeal, and why it could keep adapting in multiple cultural and historical contexts – precisely because it was detached from a geographical center. “Without the body of Jesus to create a memorial, no land or language could monopolize a claim to sacredness.” (<https://sojo.net/print/222857>) Of course as time went on, there was Rome and there was worship in Latin and Latin only, and this drawing of lines, this is holy, this is not.... but that is not the way it all started. As Samuel Son says, what the Ascension really means, to bring it home to us here today, is that Christ is not here in America any more than anywhere else.

This was helpful to me, because much of my life I have struggled with Militarism, and with the idea we as a nation are marked for setting the world aright. It's why every year I seem to struggle with a Memorial Day sermon, though of course the day is more about remembrance than it is about patriotic chest thumping. Don't get me

wrong. Here in the United States we do have much to be proud of. But we've been given this national religion that speaks of our being "a city on a hill", that understands itself to have a "manifest destiny" to conquer and spread democracy as a divine prerogative. Maybe I am working something out here today, and that in the end isn't as helpful to you as it is necessary for me, but I struggle with the way Christianity gets co-opted for national purposes, or for political purposes.

And so it came to pass that this past Thursday my husband Mike and I flew to Annapolis, Maryland, to attend our grandson Stephen's graduation from the Naval Academy. I knew it would be another world, unlike any graduation I'd ever attended and I knew that while we'd certainly celebrate Stephen's accomplishments, and his classmates with him, that it would likely stir me up some around these issues. So we come into the huge football stadium with battle places around the globe in bold print on the seating areas.

As we waited, and waited for the ceremonies to begin the grads in some ways seemed like any other group of young people, enjoying their time, hamming it up for the camera that projected their faces up on the big screen, the jumbotron. But of course they weren't just like any other group of young people, for they weren't just graduating -- they were being *commissioned* for service to our country, and in a time when world peace seems fragile indeed. And there were lives represented in all those battles listed in the stadium -- lives lost, lives forever changed.

I don't know what others thought about in the considerable time we had to wait for things to begin. But I found myself thinking of this Memorial Day, and how we can remember those who have died, honor them, and at the same time pray that there will be no more war. I thought of how different our world is now from the years when so many of those naval battles were fought. The ocean no longer separates us the way it once did, the enemy is no longer so clearly a nation or block of nations but rather those who practice hatred in the most cowardly of ways, often in the name of religion. I thought of Manchester England and how that bombing was targeting an event with a pop singer whose mission it was to empower young girls. I thought of how this Naval Academy, once a male bastion, now had so many graduates who were female. My mind flitted about, as it often does in times of great importance.

Truth be told, Mike and I both went to this graduation with some anxiety. Stephens parents had recently divorced, and were now each with someone new. Would it be awkward to have everyone together in this way? And the military really does feel like another world to us. When the speeches began, would we feel like our only option was to tune out, day dreaming about something else?

Well, eventually the Navy band got to playing, the Blue Angels flew overhead, and the ceremonies began. I am happy to report it was way better than we might have imagined. It was hard not to get swept up in the celebration, to feel proud of our grandson and his classmates. There wasn't any talk of American Christian Exceptionalism not even in the opening prayer. The emphasis throughout was on

service and commitment and of course, how exceptional these graduates were. A further surprise – when Vice President Mike Pence took the podium to speak, he lifted up a navy tradition of classmates each giving the student in the anchor position a dollar, so that this year the one with the lowest class rank or grade point average for the class of 2017 would receive a thousand and fifty two dollars the Navy's way of saying we are all in this together, everyone is important, we are all a link in the chain....I found this surprising, and moving, and certainly a far cry from the race-to-the-top-and-stay-there mentality that I thought was so much a part of military culture.

Upon my return yesterday to town, I visited my father. He has Alzheimers, and he finds his new life in the assisted living place lonely – and I find his loneliness painful, because while I can be a companion, I can visit, I can love him I cannot remove this loneliness from him.

I also heard from Emmaline's grandmother, who left me a message that understandably was so distraught – imagine a thirteen year old family member fighting for her life in this way, how scary that would feel. And this prayer concern of Gina's, a young life snuffed out too soon. In so many places, in nearly every place there is loneliness, there is suffering, there is heightened anxiety – we none of us escape it. It is part of the human condition, part of the life of people in every nation on earth. There was something about this juxtaposition of these earthly realities of life, and the Blue Angels flying above that felt so poignant, and in many ways, beyond words. We struggle and we hope. It is what we do.

And the good news of the Ascension, our odd but pertinent scripture for today, is that the Ascension *left space for Jesus to show up pretty much anywhere*. If the grave could not contain him, if earth could not hold him, it was also true that Jesus was not more alive, more able to be located in one place than any other. Jesus, for instance, could show up at a Navy graduation, in the heart of grandparents who love their grandson but who aren't very comfortable with military talk and military ways and in the hearts too of grandparents unreservedly beaming with pride, for whom this is the third generation to be commissioned for military service. And Jesus who is not bound to any one place could show up in the assisted living facility, and in the intensive care unit. And at the funeral home. And yes, Jesus could show up in Heifer International Countries, where people's lives are made better because of the gift of animals, or seeds, honeybees, or fish.

The Ascension is really just about being church, our living in relationship with a Jesus who cannot be contained, and certainly not assigned permanent residence in any one place.

We keep learning this. Over and over we do.

Amen.