

May 12, 2024

My prayer is from today's epistle:

May we be given a spirit of wisdom and revelation as we come to know God, so that, the eyes of our hearts are enlightened to the hope to which we are called.

For many faithful Christians the ascension is hard to understand. Given our modern, scientific outlook on the world, our understanding of gravity and the expanding universe—of solar systems and galaxies beyond the earth's clouds, and evolving beliefs about heaven as something different than a place above the sky scenes of Jesus rising to heaven like a helium balloon can be hard to make sense of

the resurrection, the ascension and Pentecost are ways of grappling with what Easter means about Jesus, God, Spirit, and us. Jesus' friends and companions were adamant. Jesus had died, was brutally executed as a criminal and disruptor, but he continued to live. They saw him, received messages from him, and were different because of it. Jesus was with them individually and in community. But he wasn't with them the way he had been before.

When Jesus was killed, the disciples were afraid, lost, and confused. Their hopes, their dreams, Jesus' vision of a kingdom of peace, justice, and love were—nailed to the cross along with their teacher and friend. They believed that it had all been for nothing and that—Jesus' fate might be their fate too. So, they went into hiding. They locked their doors. They feared any knock, any noise, might be the sounds of the soldiers coming for them as well.

But it was not the Roman soldiers who knocked on the door, or appeared among the disciples, but Jesus himself. Jesus. Resurrected. His death, his execution, the evil which sought to destroy him, was overcome. He appeared among the disciples saying Peace. It must have taken more than—a few short minutes to understand what was happening I doubt that they simply rejoiced when they first saw their resurrected Lord. I suspect that they approached him—with

hesitation. Were their eyes were deceiving them? Was Jesus truly alive or was this just a ghostly reminder of their past hopes and dreams.

Only after time did they settle into the knowledge that Jesus was alive and with them again not in the same way—that he was before Good Friday; but there they were, learning from him again, loving and being loved by him again.

Then in the midst of that comfort, that renewed sense of security and hope, in the midst of that peace, comes Jesus' departure once more. This time, he was not killed—like a criminal, but swept up into the heart and being of God. And yet, I suspect that to the—disciples it must have seemed much the same.

We actually hear about the ascension twice in today's readings, in the Gospel of Luke and in the book of Acts

The Acts version is one of the funnier biblical narratives. —practically slapstick comedy.

In a kind of grand finale of the gospel theme of "The disciples just don't get it" the apostles demand of the resurrected Jesus "*Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?*"

In other words, "It's great that you're back from the dead and everything but *now* are we going to throw the Romans off our back and get what we deserve?" In response, Jesus promises an entirely different kind of power then promptly disappears into a cloud as though in exasperation.

I imagine the disciples later slapping their foreheads and saying "I can't believe *that* was the last thing we said to him"

So then the stooges are standing looking up at the place where Jesus has disappeared. I certainly imagine them with open mouths.

Suddenly two men appear and ask "why are you looking up?" The scene is parallel to Easter morning where the two men in dazzling clothes chasten the women at the empty tomb. But in this case the men in white may simply have walked up on the cloudgazers.

"Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" 1:11

"Agh, Where did you come from?"

At the risk of sacrilege, some aspects of the ascension are explained remarkably well in the Wizard of Oz -- near the end of the film the wizard is about to take Dorothy home to Kansas in his giant hot-air balloon. Only, Dorothy gets out of the balloon to retrieve Toto, and in the commotion the wizard and the balloon accidentally take off. Higher and higher they go, out of sight. And Dorothy, realizes she has been left behind. Her savior went home without her to the land that she had-dreamed of. I think it was probably pretty similar for the disciples, who felt Jesus-leave them. again.

And in some ways what happens next is the same for Dorothy as it is for the disciples and for us. Glinda tells Dorothy that she has had what she needed with her all along. And Jesus does the same.

Nothing good was lost when Jesus-departed from the disciples' sight. Goodness, mercy, love, forgiveness, justice did not soar up into the sky, out of our grasp. Rather, Jesus shared these gifts with those he loved. Jesus commended his ministry to his friends, and called them to do what he did. He called us to be like him, children of God.

Often we think that a life of faith means focusing on heaven, a bit like the disciples standing there looking up. But I believe Jesus would have us look back down, look around and see who is standing beside us.

One way of understanding the ascension is the idea that Jesus had to stop being in one place, so that he could be present everywhere.

The apostle Paul called the church the Body of Christ.

In the 16th C Teresa of Avila said: "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 looks out on a hurting world, yours are the feet with which he goes about doing good; yours are the hands with which he is to bless now."

19th century Oxford bishop Charles Gore, said: “The church is the body of Christ. It is the extension and perpetuation of the Incarnation in the world.”

The extension and perpetuation of the Incarnation in the world. That’s us. Here and now. We are who Jesus was.

All of us knit together from our many backgrounds, all of our many beliefs and perspectives and passions, all woven together into a new cosmic reality that is Christ’s presence in the world. women and men, neither and both, young and old, black, brown, white, rich and poor, gay and straight, those who are purple haired, those who are pierced and tattooed, Together, we are Jesus’ on-going presence in the world, as we love each other, as we heal and bring hope to each other. As we work for justice.

I have no doubt that 2000 years ago the disciples were perplexed. They were afraid and uncertain of their future. As they looked for Jesus they had two choices—could look up to the sky and watch him soar away like the wizard in his balloon.

Or they could do something else. They could look into the faces of those around them, they could look into their own hearts, and find Christ, right there. Still with them. Still alive. Still loving them, touching them and healing them. Christ, still challenging them, and still sending them out into the world to preach God’s mission of justice, compassion, and reconciliation. That was where the disciples would find him. And I pray that we may find him there too.