

Today is the seventh Sunday of Easter season. At St. Peter's, we observe today as the feast of the Ascension. The reason for that is that Ascension Day always falls on a Thursday. If we didn't shift it to the following Sunday, it would slip by almost unnoticed. And it is too important a feast for that.

Within the liturgical year, there are two great arcs of preparation and celebration, each anchored by a major feast. The first arc begins with the four Sundays of Advent, which prepare us to welcome God-with-us, Emmanuel, and the celebration of Christmas, and culminating in the feast of the Epiphany, when the child born in such humble circumstances is revealed as the Saviour and Light of the nations. The second great arc begins with Ash Wednesday and continues with the six weeks of Lent, in which we journey with Jesus toward the cross and examine the brokenness of our lives and of the world that made the cross necessary. In Holy Week, we walk the way of the cross with Jesus. This arc reaches its climax with Easter and the glorious resurrection of Jesus. In the seven weeks of Easter season, we learn to live as a resurrection people, and we are prepared for the mission that Jesus will entrust to us. The Ascension marks the end of Jesus' physical presence among his followers and leads to the celebration of Pentecost, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit who empowers us to carry out God's mission. The second arc of Lent-Easter-Pentecost is much longer than the first arc of Advent-Christmas-Epiphany, indicating its greater importance.

The Ascension, then, is a moment within this second arc. The witness of the New Testament to the Ascension is varied.

- The earliest tradition proclaims Christ risen and ascended, but not in any kind of sequential understanding. Resurrection and Ascension are understood together. They both mean "glorified". Paul picks up this tradition in his letter to the Philippians: "Christ humbled himself; therefore, God has exalted him." This earliest understanding is reflected in the epistle to the Ephesians, which we heard today: "God put this power (that is God's own power) to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places." So, it's resurrection/ascension/glorification as one event. This is also the understanding in John's gospel.
- Later, the Ascension emerged as a distinct event in the tradition. The gospel of Luke places the Ascension on Easter Sunday evening. Here's the sequence: the women discover the empty tomb and tell the disciples, who dismiss it as an idle tale. Later the same day, two disciples encounter the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus and recognize him in the breaking of the bread. They hurry back to Jerusalem to find that Christ has appeared to Peter also. Suddenly Jesus is with them again; they share food, then he blesses them and departs from them, as we heard in today's gospel passage. In John's gospel, Jesus tells Mary Magdalene not to cling to him, because he has not yet ascended to the Father. He gives her a message for the others, that he is ascending "to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God". That same evening, the risen and ascended Christ breathes the Holy Spirit on his disciples. Presumably John understands Jesus' return to God to have occurred sometime after his appearance to Mary Magdalene and

before his appearance in the upper room. Indeed, it is very much part of John's theology to say that the hour of Jesus' glorification and return to the Father includes his crucifixion and death as well as his resurrection and ascension.

- Only the book of Acts, which is volume two of Luke's work, places the Ascension forty days after Easter. The account in Acts is a historicizing or a locating in time of something that has always been part of the Christian proclamation.

So, the Ascension is a moment in the Easter proclamation and celebration. It is a hinge moment, a time of transition between what has been and what is to come. In the days and weeks following the resurrection, Jesus prepares his disciples for the time when he will no longer be present physically with them. He reminds them of the teaching of scripture that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer before entering his glory. He commissions them as witnesses. And he tells them to wait until they receive power to carry out their mission.

Transitions are always ambivalent times, as we move from the present to the future, from the familiar to the unknown. On one hand, we might feel excited, confident, and energized, sure of our purpose and direction. On the other hand, we might feel anxious, unsure, uncertain, and afraid. These ambivalent feelings are just part of the package. They come with the territory. And they are completely normal. Look at the disciples themselves, in today's reading from Acts. They are still stuck on an old agenda: "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" Is this it? Is it finally time? And Jesus says, "That's not for you to know." But he doesn't scold them or berate them for not understanding. He simply says, "Wait until you receive power. Then you will be my witnesses."

Ascension marks the beginning of the universalization of Jesus' mission that will be fulfilled at Pentecost. Jesus tells the apostles, "repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (Luke 24:47), and "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth: (Acts 1:8). In the book of Acts, we see the flowering of that mission throughout the Mediterranean world. Beginning with the Ascension and worked out in Acts, we see the church discerning how it may be faithful to Jesus's commission to proclaim the good news of salvation to all nations. It unfolds gradually, beginning in Jerusalem but quickly spreading to the cities of Asia Minor and eventually to Greece and to the centre of empire, Rome itself. It is a time of transition for the infant church, and there are growing pains.

I believe the church has been in another time of transition for about the last 50 years, although we have been slow to recognize it. It is the transition from Christendom to a post-Christendom world, from the time when the church was central to and embedded in western culture to a time when we are back on the margins, back on the periphery of this culture, as we were when everything started. It's a time of deep anxiety for many Christians who remember when everyone went to church; stores were closed, movie theatres were closed, there were no organized children's sports on Sundays, and Sunday schools had more children than there are people in the pews now. It's easy and understandable in these circumstances to operate from a position of fear and scarcity. We see the dwindling numbers, both financially and numerically.

We see the aging nature of many of our congregations. We worry about the future of the church. And there are some who are still looking in old directions, like the apostles wondering if the old geopolitical dream is about to come true. We just need to do more, try harder, and we can recover the “The Way We Were”. But we can’t go back to the way things used to be. The page has turned and doing the old things harder, doing more of the same isn’t working.

The heavenly messengers asked the apostles, “Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” The same might be asked of us today. Are we looking for Jesus in old structures? We haven’t yet imagined the the new ways Christ is present in the world and in our lives. The old order is being reshaped and looking to old ways may not be enough. Our creeds, our spaces, practices, and traditions have been and are important – let me make that clear – in forming our relationship with God and each other, but they need to be adaptable to new realities.

I believe God is calling us into a new way of being church. What that looks like is not yet clear, but it is emerging. The church is rediscovering mission, but in a new way. It will be a way of faithfulness while being nimble, meeting people where they are instead of expecting them to come to us, a way of thinking outside our boxes. It may involve times other than Sunday mornings and places other than the church building. Mission is more than bodies in pews. It is about sharing the good news of God’s creating, healing, and saving love. God is a missionary God. The church exists, not to sustain itself, but to make disciples who will share in God’s mission of bringing justice, love, mercy, and peace to a broken world. The church is the bearer of Christ into the world. The ministry of one person in Galilee and Jerusalem was only the beginning. As Jesus says in John’s gospel, “You will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father” (John 14:12). The church is how God intends, through Christ and through the Spirit, to transform the world.

The Ascension completes the Incarnation, when God assumed our humanity. Now, Christ has taken our humanity into the divine life of love so that we may share in it. And the reason we are invited to share God’s life of mutual, self-giving, collaborative love is so that we may witness to it and share it with all whom we meet. Our discipleship is never perfect, and so we need to gather to be formed and shaped and empowered as disciples. Then we are sent out to be witnesses of the good news of God’s unconditional, radical, constant, faithful love. As our former rector Donna used to say, we don’t come to church; we come to worship so we can be church. The Ascension prepares us for our task. It is both charge and promise. First wait, then witness. Stay in the city. Wait for the promise. You can’t do what you are sent to do until you are equipped. Then witness, to the places you know and the places you don’t, away to the ends of the earth. Begin where you are. For the disciples, that was Jerusalem. For us, it is our homes and communities, our places of work and play, our friends and family and all the networks that make up our lives. From being disciples – learners – we are to be apostles – people who are sent.

Like the first Christians, we have no idea if our witness will be heard or how it will be received. That, by the way, does not absolve us of responsibility. But we do have Christ’s promise that we will be given the tools we need. We will receive power from God, not to dominate but to serve,

not to demand but to offer the gift of a relationship with the God who yearns for the whole cosmos to be healed and restored. That is a message worth sharing. Amen.