



A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell

The Feast of the Ascension – May 16, 2021

Scripture Passages: Acts 1:1-11, Luke 24:44-53

+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Look up. Look way up.” Those of us of a certain vintage will remember those words - spoken by the Friendly Giant on the children’s show of the same name on CBC that many watched as kids. For some strange reason I always think of those words as I look up at the beautiful – stunning really – Ascension window of our cathedral. It is such an inspiring scene. I have always been so grateful that our forebears chose it to be the dominant image for our cathedral – it feels like a mandate. And of course, it is – the original mandate for the church. That’s why Ascension is one of the principal – and important feasts of the church.

Now that may surprise you. Of the seven major feasts of the church year, I always think Ascension is the one that gets short shrift. It’s the only one (well, other than Christmas, but it’s hardly a fair fight to compare any feast with Christmas) that doesn’t happen on a Sunday.

The cycle of our year from Advent on through to Christmas and Epiphany, and Lent and Easter and Pentecost and all the feasts of the church in between help establish a pattern and a sense to our faith. They mark time in a special way for Christians – they make it sacred.

And for me also it’s very meaningful – and also thorough. The cycle of the church year brings us through Jesus’ life and death and resurrection and this week, his Ascension into heaven. It’s an important rhythm. Each year walking through the events of Jesus’ life brings a deeper understanding, a different experience of his walk and of mine as a follower.

And you know it’s also important, because without this rhythm, I might not actually pause to think about the event of the Ascension in the Jesus story were it not for that cycle - and that would be a great mistake because we are in the in-between times today, and for the rest of this week. This is a liminal time.

This past Thursday the church celebrated Jesus' Ascension – it's always celebrated on the fortieth day after the Resurrection - the record of which is in the Gospel of Luke and more fully in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. And so we contemplate how it was for the disciples millennia ago, to be without Jesus' bodily presence on earth. We contemplate how it was for them before the gift of the Holy Spirit. That happens next week.

So we are in between. We are living in the pause in the story, dwelling in the comma, or the breath if you like. It's an interesting idea to mark biblical time this way. We get to use this pause in the story to think about how it was for the disciples – think about what the Ascension means for us in the church.

And although this pause is anticipatory for us because we know what the next installment in the biblical story is, it must have been filled with other emotions for the followers of Jesus: worry, fear, confusion, anxiety. It's also interesting to pause with our narrative to think about the significance of this in between time.

So, it's instructive to ask, if the Ascension means that the disciples lost Jesus, why celebrate it? Who rejoices over the loss of a loved one?

What we're doing though, is not remembering what was lost. As so often in our faith, we celebrate what was gained.

And there are a couple of reasons why we celebrate: first, for the first time, our humanity, has been taken into God. Jesus goes to God fully human and divine. So this is a kind of coming of age for the human race because Jesus took on our humanity so that we could share his divinity.

And of course there's another aspect to the Ascension. Think of it this way: it's a bit like learning to ride a bike. You know that process by which someone – maybe your Mum or your Dad ran along side you holding the bike steady while you learned to balance but at some stage they let go and you rode on your own? Unsteadily at first, maybe falling once or twice, but essentially you were independent. Well, this is sort of like that.

We mark the celebration of Christ's Ascension because it's the day Jesus let go of the handlebars. God lets go enough so that the Church can become herself. God lets go so that human faith and courage might have a go at making disciples and furthering the mission of God with the help of the Holy Spirit.

And we hear about the apostles' preparation for their as yet, unknown future this morning in the choosing of a twelfth man – a witness to all the events of Jesus' life. But it had to be "one of the men who have accompanied them during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among them, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from them.

Peter says, “one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection” - one of them, who could witness reliably and truthfully to the events that produced their faith in Jesus. This action is a little window in on how the disciples ‘tooled up’ for the next chapter in the story of the early church – even though they were unaware of exactly what was to come. What was this future they were preparing for anyway?

Jesus has gathered with the disciples and is speaking to them about the kingdom of God. He tells them to wait for the Holy Spirit. But they still understandably have questions: “Lord is this the time you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”

They’re still holding on to that old idea; that Jesus had come to redeem - and militarize and weaponize Israel – to vanquish all their foes. Gosh, that idea has an ominous resonance this week as violence seems to engulf the Holy Land.

But of course Jesus says that’s not the plan. It’s really interesting that even his crucifixion and resurrection didn’t quite convince them that this wasn’t the plan. His post-Resurrection appearances seems to have given them renewed hope that maybe the vanquishing thing could still happen.

But the Ascension makes it super clear that there is a different agenda. God’s agenda. Turns out their agenda is too small. God has a much bigger plan.

Jesus is the start of something big: his resurrection was the beginning of the transformation of all creation – the remaking of our world – like a second flood but this time not killing but giving life. This is what God is up to in sending his son among us.

Ascension tells us that the first part of Jesus’ mission has been accomplished. It also tells us that we are now to get on with the ministry – with what he taught us. Then. And now. Right now. The training wheels are off.

Now. Now you may be at home wondering how this will be possible? You may be worrying about our church. You may be worrying about your parish. What in a post-Covid landscape what might be left. Who might be left. And it’s easy to understand why you might feel that way – think that way. We’ve been apart for so long, it’s beginning to be difficult to remember what it’s like to be together – to work at God’s mission together.

So let’s just remember – that we have a story – a story that tells us about a group of people who had an experience that changed their lives but who were confused and wondering what to do next. Everything they’d come to know and expect about their lives had just been turned upside down. They were just a small handful of people who lived in an impermeable culture – a culture that had so many idols and so many Gods that it was hard to get any airtime.

And Jesus tells them that they need to go and be witnesses to go and make disciples. From where they were standing, there were so many obstacles – so many obstacles that it might have been overwhelming for them.

They were a small handful of people. A small handful of people though, that over time, with the help and guidance of the Holy Spirit, began to understand what story they were in. They were in the story of God’s mission of love in this world. From Genesis to Revelation, they were in the story of God’s love for this world – and God’s desire to draw all people to herself in love. And once they had hold of that realization, they were off. They were unstoppable.

And from that small handful of imperfect folks – people just like us – grew a movement so strong, so compelling, so transformative that it’s still a force for seismic change in our world – far more seismic than a pandemic. So I’m going to tell you folks – and you can take this to the bank: God is bigger than this pandemic.

So, if you are worried about your church – the people, the finances, the building – I need you to remember this – and this is a spiritual discipline folks I mean this with all my heart – put your trust in God and in the leading of the Holy Spirit. We’re going to get through this – together – because we know what story we’re in too. We are the church of Jesus Christ – and we have a mission in this world.

We have the Holy Spirit for guidance. We’re going to hear about that next week. Jesus in this way is always with us. Now we have to set about the listening for the HS’s guidance and asking for the gift of courage to accomplish the earthly mission of the church. And the feast of the Ascension marks the big old starting line.

Now let me end with a benediction that says a few things about what God’s – and our – mission is in this world. This is a good prayer for all of us together this morning – for our diocese – and for your parish.

May God bless us with discomfort...

Discomfort at easy answers, half-truths and superficial relationships,
Discomfort, so that we will live deep within our heart.

May God bless us with anger...

Anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people,
Anger, so that we will work for justice, freedom, and peace.

May God bless us with tears...

Tears to shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, starvation and war,
Tears, so that we will reach out to comfort them
And turn their pain into joy.

And, may God bless us with foolishness...
Foolishness to believe that we can make a difference in this world,
Foolishness, so that we will do what others claim cannot be done.
Amen.

+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.