

Sermon for the Seventh Sunday of Easter
The Sunday after the Ascension
RCL Lectionary, Year B
Acts 1:15-17, 21-26; Psalm 1; 1 John 5:9-13; John 17:6-19
May 24th, 2009

The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California

Riddles of Ascensiontide
by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

This week was one of usual busy-ness for the Church of Our Saviour. On Tuesday, a group of parishioners joined in the monthly lunch for those in need at Our Lady of Mount Carmel. Tuesday evening, I joined other member of the Youth Addiction and Suicide Prevention Coalition at a meeting at the Marin Civic Center to discuss, "Parents, Teens, and the Law." Not exactly high theological stuff, mind you, but informative just the same about the challenges our youth and their families are facing in this day and age!

Thursday, I sat down with our Youth Minister Search team to discuss next steps in our now months-long endeavor to find new leadership for our talented and vivacious EPIC Youth Group. It felt a bit like today's scene from Acts, discerning the way forward and preparing to cast lots to seek God's will. Then I was off to a meeting to get ready for General Convention which is this summer – the great gathering of the Episcopal Church every three years where "the business" gets done. Our discussion ranged from the ongoing (and now rather exhausted) controversy over human sexuality, marriage, and that favorite Episcopal pastime – the consecration of bishops – to the arcane canons governing clergy discipline, to funding mission and ministry, and taking steps to alleviate global poverty and environmental degradation.

In the midst of all this was the usual parish work of tending the sick and comforting the afflicted. . .and of keeping the office going, getting the *Perspective* ready, making sure the bulletins were printed and folded, the sermon written, the facilities kept in working order.

It was, in that sense, a pretty typical week at Church of Our Saviour: not incredibly high and lofty work, but nor was it anything unimportant. In short, in good Anglican fashion, it was appropriately messy work – prayerful and practical where we acknowledge God and then roll up our sleeves in the world.

But what slipped by many of us this week was one of the feasts of the church year: Ascension Day. It probably befits us as contemporary Christians that the only nod we gave it together as a community this year was by two of us gathering together in Morning Prayer. . .gathering together to recount the stories of Luke's Gospel and the opening to Acts – stories of Jesus rising into heaven while his closest followers watched and wondered.

I must admit a side to me that finds the account somewhat ho-hum, like a cheap science fiction story, bordering – to my twenty-first century mind at least – on the silly. It brought to mind Bishop Jack Spong's iconoclastic, somewhat offhanded remark that we

simply know better now. . . Jesus didn't go into orbit! Perhaps just as dismissive is the temptation to see the stories of the ascension as a mere literary device – a way to get the Risen Christ out of the way. A resurrected, immortal Jesus, after all, poses a problem for his second-generation followers. Just where is he now, if he appeared in such corporeal form to his first disciples?

Frankly, of all the stories about the person we call Lord and Savior, Messiah and Teacher, Truth and Friend of Friends, it's the ascension that is most likely to make me blush with some embarrassment. Jesus' rising up into the clouds, with all of its tick-tacky and somewhat new age-y depictions, offends my sense of good taste. Yet the ascension is not only part of our Church calendar, it is part of our creeds, a central tenant of our faith. And while scientific inquiry has radically altered our view of the universe from that of the first century, if truth be told, we as human beings still intuitively look upward when we think of something greater than ourselves: the transcendent, the divine, the holy. The urge is to look skywards to "rise above ourselves" in order to obtain inspiration or take the first step towards a lofty goal.

One answer to the riddle of ascension is simply in our gathering together here this morning, recognizing in our midst, in one another, and in communion the presence of Christ. Somehow, the Risen Christ must transcend the historical confines of the first century, must move beyond the limits of time and space to truly become one in the great self-offering. . . and one forever. . . with the human family in all times and places. . . and perhaps one with the entire universe itself.

Another part of the answer to the riddle of the ascension appears in today's reading from the Gospel of John, where we hear part of what has become known in our tradition as Jesus' high priestly prayer. It opens with Christ looking up to heaven – a transcendent moment – and the strange yet familiar theological language that wrestles to put into words who we are as a Christian community: a people who live in the somewhat inexplicable but fruitful and transformative interface between this world and God's as-yet-unfinished world or kingdom. Jesus as the Christ becomes the one who breaks down the barrier between our world and the next, death and new life, the old and the new, the ephemeral and the eternal.

It is into this in-between place that we are called to not only remember, but live. It is this place that we not only look up, but step into even with all of our concerns of this day and the passing frustrations and joys of our life in the world. Very much like the first apostles, we gather following the ascension and get on with the business of community, casting lots or something like it to find new leadership; tending to our needs and the needs of others; drawing outsiders and those marginalized into this strange, transformative, and wonderful life in Christ; consulting, debating, and conversing over where we go from here as people called together by God's grace. It's messy because it's worldly business in some ways, transcendent and divine in others. But this messiness is where we live, and to where we are called as a people open to the Spirit of God, and promised the abundant joys of resurrected life. *Amen.*