

Feast of the Ascension (*transferred*) May 8, 2016
St. Timothy's Episcopal Church, Creve Coeur, Missouri
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Forty days after Easter, the Church commemorates Jesus' ascension into heaven. That would have been this past Thursday, but the rector has the liturgical freedom to transfer the celebration to the following Sunday (Liturgical freedom may seem a contradiction in terms, but it does exist).

Scripture tells us that Jesus ascended into heaven in the presence of his eleven Apostles (this was before Matthias was elected to replace Judas) and is seated at the right hand of God the Father, establishing his authority and power. The three scriptures we just read are key passages about the Ascension.

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The Ascension has been a chief feast of the Christian year since earliest times. We claim it every Sunday as we recite the Nicene Creed or Apostle's Creed and it is included in many ancient and contemporary Eucharistic prayers.

While some do live faithfully in a literal understanding of the Ascension, there is good reason to recognize that the scriptural account is symbolic and metaphorical. We tend to think we are sophisticated and that the primitive peoples of the early church took all this stuff literally, three-story universe and the like. But as a clergy colleague suggested maybe, just maybe, the people of two-thousand years ago were incredibly sophisticated, too, and that "it would have never crossed their minds to do something like literalize the stories that surrounded the completion of Jesus' earthly ministry" (Appleyard, 2014).

For the last twenty years, it has been particularly meaningful to me because I was ordained an Episcopal priest at St. Paul's Cathedral in Syracuse, NY in the Diocese of Central New York on the Feast of the Ascension. As some of you know, before I studied for Anglican orders, I had began ministry within the Lutheran Church. My ordination as a Lutheran pastor took place on the Second Sunday of Advent back in 1971. (*If you followed the thread of those dates and add them up, you come upon the fact that I am growing pretty old*).

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I did not pick those ordination dates, but I recognize that there is a thread, there. Both Advent and Ascension-tide are liturgical seasons that point us to hope and anticipation.

- Advent, of course, has to do with the looking forward to the birth of Christ, the type of waiting that characterizes a time of pregnant expectation.
- The Ascension, on the other hand, at the far end of the story Jesus' life, death and resurrection puts us again into a time of hope and anticipation for the gift of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost.

The thread is one of optimistic waiting, of beginnings and endings, of living faithfully through the in-between times, of being strong and carrying on. Life in Christ always means living between “the now” and “the future,” between our current circumstances and our confidence in the promised full experience of God’s loving kingdom.

For Christians past and present, the Ascension proclaims the lordship of Christ. This has both religious and political implications. It means he is the Lord of my life, but it also means that Jesus is Lord of all the earth. Therefore, the Herod’s and Caesar’s of this world, then and now, are not lords. In this election season, it’s a good reminder that our ultimate allegiance and confidence is in our Lord Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of love, justice and peace that he came to initiate.

The Ascension assures us that Jesus, now one with God, can be experienced anywhere. The ascended Lord is not limited to time or space and certainly not church! Jesus is experienced in his followers, in all who live into his teaching and all who need to find the love God in their life.

- In his birth, Jesus joined heaven to earth.
- In his ascension, he has joined earth to heaven, as the fullness of his humanity ascends back into God’s life.

There is now no separation between heaven and earth, no separation between Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave or free, holy or unholy. Joining heaven and earth, Jesus opens the way of freedom and life for all.

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Last year, a friend sent me an Ascension Day cartoon. Jesus is pictured ascending into the clouds of heaven, while a bewildered disciple looking skyward blurts out: “Where? Where? I can’t see him?” In a side bar, the cartoon notes this disciple is suffering from *Ascension Deficit Disorder*.

- Indeed, the church suffers from *Ascension Deficit Disorder* when it loses hope and anticipation.
- We suffer from ADD if we look in the wrong direction to find and serve our Lord Jesus Christ.
- There is a deficit in our attention if we are focused on trivial things in church life or personal life.
- We suffer from *Ascension Deficit Disorder* if we fail to seek and serve Christ in all persons, if we do not shield the lost, the suffering and the persecuted for the sake of Christ.

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There is a powerful photograph going viral on the internet of Maria-Teresa Asplund, a 42-year old citizen of Sweden standing alone last Sunday, her fist raised firmly in protest, as she faces down hundreds of neo-Nazi marchers in the industrial town of Borlänge in Sweden.

Tess, as she is known, is black and has lived in Sweden for 20-years, but those white neo-Nazi marchers would just as soon have walked over her, acting on their racial loathing. But raising her fist heavenward, she looks straight at them to confront their hatreds that would deprive children of God of life and freedom based on the color of their skin.

Despite the potential for violence, she said: "When I did it, I was angry. I wasn't scared,"

She is not *Ascension Deficit Disordered*. She is looking in the right direction and concerned about the right stuff. She may be angry, but she is adamantly hopeful. She may or may not know Jesus personally, but she is keeping her eye on the prize of justice, peace and love for all of God's children.

What better example and inspiration for us as on this Feast of the Ascension?

May her courageous actions move us to also follow our risen and ascended Lord, living against hatred and moving toward the fulfillment of the Kingdom of love.