

Sermon: Ascension Day, Acts 1:1-11
Confirmation, Reception, Reaffirmation
Christ Church Riverdale, 1 May 2008
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Acts 1:1-11 ^{NRS} **1** In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning ² until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³ After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. ⁴ While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; ⁵ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." ⁶ So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷ He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." ⁹ When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰ While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. ¹¹ They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Tonight's service is one of those good things that just happen as by-products of when people sit and talk face-to-face. Bishop Taylor and I visited in his office on another matter and in the exchange of pleasantries the ball just started rolling for him to celebrate Ascension Day here. And if Christ Church Riverdale isn't his second home, I think it's at the very least one of his favorite timeshares! Now it's not always possible to meet personally, and some communication is best done in writing. But being in each other's presence, seeing each other face-to-face allowed the Holy Spirit to move in the bishop's and my conversation in a much fuller way than an exchange of e-mails, much less text messages!

Jesus' ascension 40 days after his resurrection marks a challenge in the life of his disciples—
how will they continue their relationship with Jesus after they can't see him face to face on earth any more? The number forty in the Bible typically represents sufficiency, represents enough: 40 days and nights of rain . . . 40 years wandering in the wilderness . . . Jesus fasting in the desert 40 days. . . . 40 days, then, was a long enough period of time for the risen Christ to complete the ministry of appearing to the apostles and teaching them how to go forward. When Jesus ascends--when he goes "up" to heaven in the cosmology of his day—he becomes no longer visible to human eyes. And things become different—for the disciples at that time, and for every generation afterward, including ours. Followers of Jesus will have to live into a relationship with a person they can't see--can't even email or text message (although I have heard prayer

referred to as “knee mail”).

Yes, Jesus promises the disciples will receive the Holy Spirit, but everyone who’s been to school knows that the character of a class can change completely the minute—the second—the teacher steps out of the room! It takes real maturity to stay on task when the teacher is gone. Even more of a test of education is how we retain and use what we’ve learned. Doing math in school I was like most of my classmates—we didn’t like “word problems” with things like trains at different speeds or apples, oranges, and bananas at different prices. Just give us the formula and we’ll solve the equation! Yet in adulthood life I occasionally encounter word problems—real-life things I need to figure out mathematically, and with some grinding of the gears have managed to remember how to do it! The Ascension asks the question, how will we respond to the word problems in Jesus’ “absence?” Around Easter Day I like to preach about “resurrection living,” constantly seeking—and expecting--new life where the world sees only death. So what might “ascension living” look like?

The collect we prayed near the beginning of the service said, “as we believe . . . Jesus . . . to have ascended into heaven, so may we also in heart and mind there ascend.” What a beautiful image—ascending to heaven in heart and mind, but make no mistake--this uplifting is not escapism! Yes, it’s been said that Christians can be so heavenly minded that sometimes we’re of no earthly use, but this prayer doesn’t ask for our hands and feet to go anywhere. To me, ascension living means that even with hearts and minds in heaven, our feet stay firmly on the ground where we pray, “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” and our hands stay open and ready to help that come about.

In a few minutes, we will recite the Baptismal Covenant with four women who are renewing their commitment to Jesus Christ. Together we will declare what we believe about God—hearts and minds in heaven, so to speak, and then say what we intend to do about it—feet and hands on earth. Each of these women has been through at least one major transition during the past year—Beth was married, Steph and Nina had babies, and Posey started graduate school. Transitions are stressful; transitions are time-consuming, yet in the midst of these transitions each of them carved out time and energy to prepare for this sacramental rite through study and prayer. Ascension living, I would say.

Hearts and minds in heaven to me means not giving up on the best, not giving up on our highest ideals, not becoming cynical, but continuing to trust even though we don’t see Jesus face-to-face . . . or do we? An orphaned child far older than the cuteness of infancy, a child who’s been in trouble, who has an attitude, who nobody seems to want--this child is adopted into a loving and stable family. A person stands up to injustice and oppression and uses his God-given faculties to find a way to do it non-violently. A person abused as a child finds the courage to speak out, helping to heal others who have suffered and to help prevent similar abuse in the future. A voter digs deeper than the sound bites to become fully informed about the truly important issues, then advocates and pulls the lever not to advance herself, but to advance the common good. A consumer makes choices based not on price or prestige but taking into consideration the environmental and human costs-- for people across the globe and people yet to

be born. Ascension living--hearts and minds in heaven, with hands and feet active on earth. Ascension living doesn't have to see Jesus face-to-face in person. Ascension living sees the face of Jesus in *every* person.