

Ascension (*transferred*), 5/29/2022, St. David's, Acts 1:1-11, Luke 24:44-53 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

The Feast of the Ascension takes place exactly forty days after Easter, so it was last Thursday, but I transferred the readings to today so that more of us would get a chance to experience Ascension. I read in a *Christian Century* essay¹ that for at least some Amish Christians, Ascension is more important than even Easter. But it's not a feast day for them: more like a fast day, a time of mourning. A lament because that's when Jesus left.

Another commentator I read this week asserted how important it is for us *not* to think of the Ascension as Jesus leaving. Jesus wasn't departing, this man argued, but being enthroned on the right hand of the father. He wasn't leaving but being glorified.² I lean more toward the first commentator, however, because if someone I had followed around for a year or more was suddenly sucked into the sky and no longer accompanied me in the same way, I would miss them, even if I could glimpse them shining on their throne from time to time.

This tension and confusion about Ascension exemplify something that I love about our denomination: the way we can embrace gray—not gray as in older people, although we Episcopalians have lots of seniors and seniors are amazing: but gray as in nuance. Jesus did not just leave the disciples hanging. Ten days later they were equipped with the Holy Spirit, who still blows around us and empowers us today. But Ascension does observe that the resurrection didn't mean that Jesus is still among us in the same way today. Instead, ascension sets us up for that Advent message that we mostly ignore; that is, that Jesus will come *again*, and that we as Christians are called to long for that second coming. For Jesus to again be among us physically present.

We're waiting. Ascension reminds us that we are waiting.

Who here likes waiting?

Waiting can be torturous. Waiting for test results or for a diagnosis. Waiting for someone we love to come home. Waiting to find out if you got the job or made the team or waiting to see how much the grocery bill is going to total or whether you have been approved for a loan or benefit that you really need. Waiting to feel better. Waiting for the sermon to be over. Waiting for your loved one's surgery to be over. Waiting rooms in hospitals are difficult places.

Is our world one big waiting room like that while we wait for Jesus to come back?

The disciples don't seem to have much trouble waiting for the Holy Spirit—at least, not in the Gospel of Luke reading, where Jesus withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven and they returned to Jerusalem with great joy, continually in the temple blessing God. That doesn't seem very agonizing.

¹ Villegas, Isaac, "May 10: Ascension of the Lord," in *The Christian Century*, April 10, 2018, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/may-10-ascension-lord-luke-2444-53>.

² Barreto, Eric, "Acts 1:1-11," in *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*, Year A, Vol., 2, 287.

But take a look at the account in the Acts of the Apostles in your bulletin, which was our first reading this morning. There's a hint there, at least in my opinion: as the disciples were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. The detail that stands out to me is that they were still staring up into heaven when two men in white robes suddenly appeared and stood by them and spoke.

That the disciples were still looking up when these guys showed up indicates to me a feeling of longing, maybe sadness, perhaps feeling bereft. The white-robed duo asks why the disciples are just standing looking into heaven. Don't just stand there looking upwards, the white-clad ones say. He'll come back eventually. I like that in Acts, the disciples had to hear that before they went on to Jerusalem.

Ascension is confusing, and faith is confusing: at least, in my opinion, faith is confusing when you're doing it right. I do not have patience for those who believe that they know everything when it comes to their Christian faith. Have you noticed how Jesus asked many questions when he was with us, and sometimes answered questions not with clear answers but with stories, some of which were odd and confusing? The Bible wouldn't be as fascinating if it were easily understandable and clear. If all of the characters were one dimensional. Instead, we study and interpret and argue. We scratch our heads.

It's clear that God loves us, that Christ sent the Holy Spirit, and that Christ is coming back. Other things aren't clear. Why do we have to wait? Why do we suffer? *When* is Christ coming back? What's the point of cockroaches and mosquitoes?

And there are horrible questions that arise from the news. Why another mass shooting, this time killing nineteen children? Nineteen children. I'd rather try to answer questions about what the Ascension means than questions about that, but church is the place where we bring our questions and set them before the altar. Where we ask questions and lament and shout and struggle. How long, o Lord?

What will our world look like when Jesus shows up again? What are you going to do to bring about a better world?