

The Seventh Sunday of Easter
24 May 2020
St. Michael's Episcopal Church on YouTube
The Rev. Dr. Jason Haddox
Acts 1:6-14; John 17:1-11

Alleluia! Christ is risen!
(*People:* The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!)

This past Thursday was of the Feast of the Ascension, the 40th day after the Resurrection, the completion of Jesus' earthly bodily ministry. (A current meme circulating on social media describes it as "The day when even Jesus began to work from home.") I want to begin with the prayer for Ascension Day, as provided in the Book of Common Prayer on page 226.

"Almighty God, whose blessed Son our Savior Jesus Christ ascended far above all heavens so that he might fill all things: Mercifully give us faith to perceive that, according to his promise, he abides with his Church on earth, even to the end of the ages..."

He ascended above all things, so that he would be part of all things. Even now.

Last Thursday also happened to be the 21st of May. And I mention this because, ten years ago, a Christian radio preacher and self-proclaimed prophet by the name of Harold Camping decreed that May 21st, 2011, was going to be THE DAY on which Jesus would return to earth to gather up all the faithful and evacuate them out of here, just before "all hell broke loose."

The so-called "Rapture" is never mentioned in the Bible as such—but the Coming of Christ in Glory certainly is, and has fascinated believers through the centuries.

"Men of Galilee!" the angelic messengers address the disciples in the reading from Acts this morning. "What are you standing around gawking at? This Jesus...will come again in the same way that you saw him go."

"He will come again, to judge the living and the dead" we say, every time we recite the Creeds.

But WHEN? We want to know!

The centuries between then and now have witnessed endless speculation and calculation and calibration, countless attempts to squeeze the Scriptures in order to produce the desired result: CERTAINTY.

Jesus tells the disciples himself: "It is not for you to know...!"

BUT...

“You (all) will receive power...and you (all) will be my witnesses...”

The Greek word translated here as “witness” is *martures*, from which we get our English word “martyr”. Someone who tells what they have seen and experienced first-hand, even when they are ignored, or threatened, or ordered not to talk about it.

“You will be my *martures*...to the ends of the earth.” In every place, and at all times.

“They returned to Jerusalem...and went to the room upstairs where they were staying...devoting themselves to prayer, with Mary the mother of Jesus and his brothers.” The upstairs room, where they had eaten their last meal together, where they were now in voluntary semi-quarantine, away from prying eyes. There they wait, together.

Jesus doesn’t give them a calendar or an itinerary –he gives them a title, and an action to perform. “Witness.”

Tell what you have seen.

Do the things that I have shown you how to do.

Share what you have received from me. Even unto death.

And stay together. The Holy Spirit will come and bring everything you need.

So they wait. In that strange, unsettled, uncertain, in-between sort of situation that is SO uncomfortable. They’re not kicked back on the sofa in their pajamas watching Netflix, or whatever the first-century equivalent of “chilling out” might be. They are going about the business of life together—food must be prepared and dishes washed, bodily needs attended to and the cat boxes scooped out and all of that. But as they do all these things, they are listening for the Spirit’s wind and rustling feathers. Watching out of the corners of their eyes, for the sparkle and flame of the holy fire that burns but does not destroy. Waiting, anticipating, expecting...

In the gospel reading from John, Jesus is praying. We’re reading this passage in late spring—almost summer—with the flowers and trees blooming green and the sun bright above us, but in the story arc it is midnight in the garden, between Holy Thursday and Good Friday. The police and the religious leaders are on their way to arrest Jesus, and time is running out.

Jesus is praying—but not for himself. He prays for his followers, his friends.

“Protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as you and I are one.”

Those who have seen Jesus have seen the Father.

Those who have experienced the healing and mercy and reconciling grace of Jesus have experienced the “chesed”, the loving-kindness of God,

who is Father, and Mother, and Rock, and Redeemer,
strong fortress tower, and clucking brood hen,
Maker and Monarch and Lover of all.

“May they be one,” Jesus prays, “as you, O God, and I are one.”

A few verses later, the prayer continues:

“I ask not only for these, but also those who will believe in me through their word, that they all may be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, that the world may believe that you have sent me.”

Jesus is praying—for US. Two thousand years later and on the other side of the planet, who have believed because of the word of someone who told us, who showed us, the Way of Jesus, because someone else had told them, had showed them, that Way...all the way back to the beginning. He is praying that we all—past, present, and future—might be joined into the life of the Godhead.

So take a moment now. Close your eyes, and in your memory call to mind someone who showed you that Way, who told you of this Jesus, and demonstrated what that loving-kindness and compassion and mercy look like in daily life.

Gently hold that person in your memory, and thank them.

(Pause)

We are called as witnesses. To tell what we have experienced of the loving-kindness and abundance of God. To tell our story, in our own words and by our own actions. To be the presence of Christ, in our time and place. And in that time and place, Christ comes again.

There is an anthem much beloved by the choir here at St. Michael's, with words attributed to St. Theresa of Avila. On a day that is to come they will sing it again—not today, but one day.

For now, remember:

Christ has no body now but yours.
No hands, no feet on earth but yours.
Yours are the eyes with which he sees;
yours are the feet with which he walks;
yours are the hands with which he blesses all the world.