
Homily

"then he said to them,repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed to all nations, Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven."

We gather this afternoon to remember and celebrate Jesus' ascension to his Father in heaven. It's a biblical scene that challenges our modern sensibilities. We heard it not once, but twice from the same author in the gospel of Luke and in the lesson from Acts. The story of the Ascension is the hinge that holds these two books of the bible together. However, the cosmology the story reveals is too simple. Heaven is up there somewhere, hell is somewhere beneath, and the earth is suspended between the two. We know this is not the case. Pictures from the Hubble telescope show us many different galaxies, suns, and planets in their courses, revealing to us the vastness of the cosmos. So what do we do with the story of Jesus' rising into heaven, his feet dangling over the edge of a cloud?

One of my favorite old black and white movies is "The Ghost and Mrs. Muir." Gene Tierney and Rex Harrison portray the main characters: Mrs. Muir, a young widow who moves into an English seaside cottage and Captain Daniel Gregg, the ghost who haunts his former home. The plot of the movie is the deepening friendship between Lucy Muir and Captain Gregg. First they learn to like, and eventually to love each other; they learn about patience and about longing. At the movies conclusion the aging Mrs. Muir dies, and as her spirit moves out of her body she is greeted by Captain Gregg. They join hands and move through the front door, into the nights mist and clouds, moving outward into the beyond, vanishing into the distance.

It's this last scene that I think of when I imagine Jesus' ascent into heaven. Like the characters in the movie I think Jesus does not move up into another realm, but moves beyond the limitations of earthly existence. Just as in death Mrs. Muir is freed from her body to move into a new relationship with Captain Gregg. But it is also in this scene that we find a striking difference between Mrs. Muir and Jesus. While her body remains slumped in the armchair where she dies, Jesus ascends to the Father with his risen body. It's the same humanity he took on when the He deigned to come among us,connecting heaven to earth. Now, mysteriously, Jesus ascends uniting earth to heaven.

Taking his fleshy body into heaven, Jesus hallows and sanctifies all of creation and human existence. Every human experience Jesus has had while living on the earth he takes to heaven. Healing the sick, welcoming the outcast, setting free the captives of injustice and oppression - often through his physical proximity or touch - Jesus was connected most deeply with broken humanity. His experiences are the same as ours. Birth and death, joy and sorrow, pain and deprivation, fellowship and love, faithfulness and betrayal,and most of all forgiveness,all are intricately woven into his experience. Now, Jesus takes all of human experience into heaven.

But before Jesus ascends he gathers with his disciples one last time in Bethany, charging them to continue his mission of proclaiming repentance and forgiveness of sins to all nations. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit the disciples are empowered to emulate Jesus; reaching out to the poor and the oppressed, to the sick and the suffering, to captives, rich and poor who need to be set free by love. When disciples embrace Jesus' call, extending forgiveness, then heaven comes down to earth once again. Jesus' ascension is necessary for his mission of love and forgiveness to spread to the ends of the earth. Jesus' ascension allows God's love to be multiplied in the lives of his followers; person to person, community to community, generation to generation, until we fill the world with the knowledge of his love and forgiveness - establishing peace for all people.

In last week's gospel reading from John Jesus said, "Those who love me will keep my word and my father will love them and WE will come and make our home with them,"

Jesus promises to go and to prepare a place for us in his Father's kingdom. Maybe what the Father and Jesus want is for us to begin preparing a place for them, a welcoming community where they will come and make their homes with us.

I often wonder if Jesus tarries, postponing his final return because the church fails to remember his charge at Bethany "the charge to live into our identity as apostles sent out to proclaim forgiveness. For you see, the home that Jesus and the Father want to build is not only in the future; it is being built in the present, in the lives of each one of us. Receiving forgiveness and giving forgiveness builds and transforms us into God's temple on earth.

After 21 centuries of waiting, we might occasionally succumb to feelings of abandonment in the absence of Jesus. His absence may cause us to yearn for God to come among us once again. But if we stand gazing into the heavens wondering about God's return, chances are we will forget our mission to be lovers and forgivers of a world in desperate need of both. We don't have angels who come to us in shining white robes, asking us why we are looking toward heaven. But we do have the gift of the Holy Spirit who reminds us of the promise of Jesus to be with us always, and we have the community of faith to encourage one another to be faithful in our task.

As we gather week after week to hear the proclamation of the scriptures, we experience the presence of the Spirit as She reveals new truths to us. In community we learn to keep Jesus' words, sharing our struggles to be faithful in ministry, and receiving forgiveness when we fail. In our Eucharistic celebrations, we retell the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection as we await his coming and are reminded of God's continuing presence. In a profound act of love, in the intimacy of a common meal God chooses to come to us in bits of bread and sips of wine. Our response to Jesus' gift of himself in the incarnation, his gift of returning to the Father with our humanity is to remember His words, to proclaim his forgiveness to others until the household of God fills the whole world.

Amen.