

I've talked before about how this day is a little odd if you take it literally. Many of us have seen the medieval paintings of the disciples looking up into the clouds and seeing a pair of feet appearing to hang from them. One painter even added the imprint of two feet on a rock at the disciples feet – as if Jesus somehow blasted off and left indents!

Some medieval churches got in on the literalism of the story - there's a Bavarian church that had an elaborate pulley system such that when the ascension was proclaimed a wooden carving of Jesus flew through the floor and up to the ceiling while another carving of the devil dropped through the floor.

Clearly the story of the ascension energized the medieval world. Today, not so much.

There's some irony to the fact that we call this view of the ascension "literalist" using a literalist interpretation of reality! By that I mean a scientific interpretation. If we can't see it, touch it, measure it, and explain it then it isn't real. Don't get me wrong, I'm not criticizing science – literalism in the world of science is a good thing! Science does a spectacular job of explaining the natural world in ways that have totally transformed our lives.

What science doesn't do – and, I think, doesn't do proudly – is explain meaning. Science can prove to us that  $2 + 2 = 4$ , can describe the logical implications of  $2 + 2 = 4$ , but is mostly mute as to what that might mean for us in the greater scheme of creation.

So we need to add another word to "literalism": religious. Religious Literalism doesn't do much for us today (well, doesn't do much for us Episcopalians, anyway!), so we're left with coming at the story from a different direction. Rather than asking "what happened, really?!" we ask, "but what does it mean?!" This is what religion does: try and answer questions of meaning.

The Church has done this from the very beginning – our problem is that we often miss those attempts at meaning-making Here's one attempt on explaining the Ascension – a metaphorical one – from Leo the Great, who was one of the early bishops of Rome – so early, in fact (5<sup>th</sup> Century) that the title "Pope" still belonged to the Patriarch of Alexandria. Sometime around 450 A.D. Leo preached a sermon on the Ascension in which he said this "Christ's Ascension is.....also our own, upon the glory of the Head rests the hope of the body. On this holy day, we have received not only the assurance of entering into possession of eternal glory, but we have already entered into the heights of heaven with Christ Jesus." ( Sermon 1 De Ascensione Domini c. iv).

Leo clearly wasn't talking literally; he was trying to convey a deeper truth about the nature of faith and the transformative consequences of following Jesus. "The Ascension means" Leo said, "we, like Jesus, will be – already have been – embraced into the heart of God.

The gospels do much the same sort of thing – we just miss it.

Following Jesus' story we hear how Jesus gathers a group of followers around himself, goes up to Jerusalem, and is executed. The disciples are bereft. Beyond all hope he returns – new life and

new possibilities about. The disciples are joyful. They celebrate.

And then – now – Jesus leaves again.

The gospels are trying to describe in profoundly metaphorical language what is a truism in human history: the very best leaders have to step aside and allow space for the people they've been leading to come most fully into their own. The gospels all indicate that the disciples of Jesus were totally dependent on him during his lifetime. Only in his final absence would they take on the responsibility of sharing his message. That, I think, is the reason for the “angels” prodding, the “stop day-dreaming and get on with it” language. It's a reminder that the baton has been passed, the responsibility transferred.

And it's a reminder, too, that the work Jesus began remained – and remains – unfinished AND that the responsibility for trying to finish it now falls on us.

The first part of that word, “responsibility” is what we're called to do: “response”. How do we respond to that?

The disciples' response – both immediate and long-term – offers some suggestions:

First, they returned to Jerusalem “rejoicing”. They finally got that now it was all up to them, and that thought wasn't daunting – they viewed it as a gift. If we see our ministries as Christians as about gift it will change how we approach them, too.

Secondly, they were ‘daily in the temple, praising God’. They worshiped. And as they worshiped a new community came into being. As we worship we are part of that same community, now some 2,000 years later.

And then, the remainder of the New Testament tells us, **they got on with it**. And they never stopped. The history of Christianity in these first years is of a committed group of individuals who were willing to risk life and limb to bring Good News of Great Joy to a world they believed desperately needed it.

So this day marks an important – and oft overlooked – moment of transition. In effect, Jesus said, “I now trust you enough that I can leave”. And that trust was, for the most part, not misplaced.

Now it's up to us. Will Jesus' trust in us be misplaced? That's the challenge of our faith for us all. AMEN.