

The Sunday after the Ascension, May 13, 2018. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church
Nigel Taber-Hamilton Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53

It would be easy, I think, to see this day and this story as about one character fading into the back-ground, making room for another, as we move from "Sun Time" to "Spirit Time." And, in part, that's true – true, at least, in the sense that this is a hinge moment, reminding us that we're entering a new time.

Luke tells us that this day that we remember – Ascension Day – was one when the friends of Jesus face the fact that they're going to have to get used to living in a world without Jesus – or at least, living in a world without the Jesus they have known. After those frightening and exhilarating few weeks of Easter, when – amazed and confused – they have almost got used to the possibility of meeting Jesus in unexpected faces and places, he is now saying to them, 'It's going to be different. Don't expect to see me around in the old way.' It would have been easy to have felt deeply disoriented, even fearful. That wouldn't have been a surprising response: they're human beings, just like us. Wouldn't we respond in the same way? Where are you going, Jesus? Where will that leave us? How can we go on without you? We look at this moment from our very human perspective! Our first thought naturally will be about where we are, in the greater scheme of things, about how we fit in this story.

Part of what Luke was trying to report to us is how we are a part of this story of Jesus' ascension. He saw an extraordinary truth that we – in our self-focused blindness – miss: that our humanity in all its variety, in all its vulnerability, has – in this moment – been taken by Jesus into the heart of the divine life. We participate in Jesus' ascension not as onlookers but as participants.

This is very good news for us, for all human beings! The humanity that we all know to be "stained, wounded, imprisoned in various ways; this humanity—yours and mine—is still capable of being embraced by God, shot through with God's glory, received and welcomed in the [very] heart of reality itself" (Rowan Williams) which is where God dwells: in the very center of all that is.

Jesus, Luke tells us, ascends to heaven. The human life of Jesus – the life we've followed from his home town in Nazareth, his home region of Galilee, his lake-side ministry, all the way to a cross in Jerusalem and beyond to the dazzling, perplexing, breath-taking moments of encounter that his followers had with him in the forty days after the tomb was found to be empty – this life "in which God has made [God's-self] most visible, most tangible, disappears from the human world in its former shape and is somehow absorbed into the endless life of God." (Williams)

I think that's what the writer of the Letter to the Ephesians meant when he spoke of Christ "filling all in all": that Jesus' humanity takes into it all the difficult, resistant, unpleasant bits of our humanity and carries them into the heart of love where alone they can be healed and transfigured – where we alone can be healed and transfigured by God's grace.

The tricky part about the Ascension is that we think it's only about Jesus departing. That's not what scripture says; this isn't one-way traffic! Luke's Jesus foresees the sense of loss looming

over his followers, and so he makes them a promise – a promise from God: the descending Spirit. The Spirit will enable us not only to be a new kind of being but to see all human beings differently – we'll be transformed; with the Spirit we'll have eyes to see and ears to hear.

As with Jesus, what we'll see and hear won't always be pleasant, cheery, or good! The world is often not a nice place! That's why when we come here, to this place, a part of us hopes – at least briefly – to escape that darker reality. The Spirit's gift to us here is courage for going back out there: the courage not to screen out those bits of the human world that are difficult, unpleasant, harsh, and cruel. The Spirit's gift opens our eyes and our ears and our hearts to the full range of what being human means, the dark and the light, the sad and the joyful, the painful and the sudden gush of celebration.

Being open in this way means that, instead of being people who need to be sheltered from the rough truth of the world, we Christians mature into people who become more open and more vulnerable to that great range of human experience.

But the fullness of that story is for next week!

The truth is that core of this day is not about Jesus leaving! The story of the ascension is the story of celebration: a celebration of the glory of humanity, the unlikely possibilities of people like you and me, and the eternal potential locked up in our muddled struggling lives being released.

And it's a celebration too of God's capacity, through the Holy Spirit, to reach into those parts of humanity that are so far from glorious, that are rebellious and troubled and broken, and to breathe through them, to take them home, and reform – transform – them – transform us – into something that's glorious.

No wonder the disciples “returned to Jerusalem with great joy”! They finally knew what we all hope to discover: that God is all-in-all, and that knowledge transformed them. May it transform us, too!