

Sunday after the Ascension – 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter – Year B – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony

Acts 1: 1-11, Psalm 47, Ephesians 1: 15-23, Luke 24: 44-53

Remember your student days and the dreaded “pop quiz”? This morning I have a “pop quiz” for you all. There are 7 Principle Feasts of the Church, more important even than Sunday. Can you name them?

Three are pretty easy, Christmas, Easter and Pentecost. The other four are Ascension, All Saints, Trinity Sunday and Epiphany.

These are principle feasts because they are “turning points” in the story of Christianity. Each year we re-create, re-live these turning points in the life of Jesus and the early Church. Each year we are invited to think about how the turning point represented by the feast is important in our on-going spiritual life. Today we celebrate the turning point that is the Feast of the Ascension.

The biblical account of Jesus’ ascension to heaven is told in most detail in the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. For forty days following the Resurrection, Jesus appeared to the disciples often, teaching them “of the things concerning the kingdom of God.” After those forty days the disciples went with the Risen Jesus out to the Mount of Olives where they watched as Jesus rose out of their sight into a cloud. In a way, the ascension was “graduation” for the disciples. They had been commissioned for the work they would do for the rest of their lives. And now on that day on the Mount of Olives, the disciples turned from being followers of Jesus to being Christians.

When was the turning point in your life when you turned from being a follower of Jesus to being a Christian? How did it happen and what did it mean for the rest of your life?

For the disciples, this change was gradual over the 40 days Jesus was with them after the Resurrection. Such a transformation had to happen in stages so that it could be absorbed. The first stage was the acceptance that Jesus had in fact been resurrected and was not dead. It was the evidence that something unique had happened. But simply appearing was not enough. Jesus had much left to teach his followers and so the forty days was spent in just that way. Teaching them what their lives would be like in the future and what God was asking of them. Asking that they go into the world, to Jerusalem and beyond asking that they share the good news of what God had done.

For us as well, the first step is a step of faith, accepting that Jesus, truly human had truly died, and in doing so conquered death for ever. Accepting the fact that Jesus was not simply a prophet but truly the Son of God. Once that first step of faith is taken we begin the life-long task of learning what God asks of us, to go into the world, our world, to be the hands and feet of God.

Those early followers had questions, so many questions. The chief among them was when. “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” If not now, when. And Jesus answer was “It is not for you to know.” Faith is not based on what we know intellectually, but what we know in our hearts. Jesus was saying to the followers and says to us; it is not for us to know when, not for us to see beyond the next few steps in our journey with God in this life. Faith asks that we walk the journey in trust, not knowing fully what might be ahead. To be faithful is to have questions, to seek answers and to know that those answers will lead to more and deeper questions.

This small band of followers on the Mount of Olives, were told *not* that they would receive knowledge but that they would receive power through the agency of the Holy Spirit. Power to be witnesses. The turning point of the Ascension was the promise of power to enable witness. This same power is promised and given to us in our baptism. Power to be witnesses, power to move from followers of Jesus to Christians.

The earliest Christians were not witnessing to a theology. They were witnessing to what they had seen, what they had experienced and what they knew to be true. That is what it means to be a Christian

witness. To tell what we see and know to be true, without worrying about outcome. And we are, like the earliest Christians to do this where ever we find ourselves. In Jerusalem, Samaria and to the ends of the earth, even to South Whidbey, Langley, Freeland and beyond. The promise of power and the call to witness was not only for those early Christians in Palestine, but for us as well. We are called to witness whenever the opportunity arises, witness with words, or with actions. Our words may not be eloquent, or learned, our actions may not be seamless, but we offer what we have and who we are and by the grace of God it is enough and more than enough.

The ascension was a way in which the Christians were set free. No longer were they dependent on the physical presence of Jesus. They had the assurance of the presence of God with them always and everywhere. We have that same assurance of the presence of God with us always and everywhere as well.

There are two unusual characters in Luke's account of the Ascension. The characters are described as two men in white garments. Some have thought that these were angels. Whatever and whoever they were, they were sent from God to ask the question that leads to the next step. This question is both specific and timeless, both for then and for now. The question is another 'turning' point as human beings move from being followers to being Christians.

The two men in white appear to the disciples as they are looking up toward heaven. Jesus had disappeared into a cloud above their heads. I can imagine that in that moment, despite all of the promises, all of the teaching and all of the experience of Jesus, the disciples suddenly feel bereft. They must have for a moment felt abandoned. And then a turning point, two men in white who ask a simple question. "Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" Why, after all that you have heard, seen and been a part of, why do you look up instead of looking around. Why do you look up instead of beginning the work you've been given to do. Jesus has been clear. The life of a Christian will now be lived not focused on heaven but on the world. It will be a life in which each Christian becomes the hands and feet of God. For us too, the question is why are we looking up, rather than around to see the needs of the world that God longs to heal? God's healing comes through us, who have committed our lives to Jesus the Christ.

There are many turning points in our lives as Christians. Some will be ones we all experience, the markers of transitions that we all encounter. Others will be unique to us alone, the opportunity that God put in our path so that we may be the witness needed in that place and time. All turning points present a choice, the choice to recognize the living presence of Jesus and the needs of the world around us.

Where have there been people like the men in dazzling white in your life? Were they angels sent from God? How have the questions they asked been important in the way you have answered the Spirit's call? Where does the Spirit seem to be leading, beckoning enticing you this day? Important questions. May each of us find this Feast of the Ascension a turning point in our spiritual lives.