



Christ's Death, Resurrection and Ascension

A sermon by the Rev. Susan Bek
Ascension Sunday, June 2, 2019

Here at St. Paul's, we follow Jesus. And because we follow Jesus, we nurture ministries and welcome everyone. Jesus is with us. I brought him with me today. And though this doll isn't actually Jesus, it is a tangible reminder of his life, his love and his constant presence with us.

I like to come into the empty church during the week when things are quiet to say my prayers. And often I find Jesus in the chapel looking a little disheveled. Sometimes hair is messed up, recently he lost one of his sandals, his clothes aren't always neat and perfect.

This reminds me that Jesus is not just for the neat, clean, perfect times in our lives. He's a messiah for all times – willing to go where we go, and when things get messy, he doesn't run off and leave us. Every minute of every day, no matter what trouble we've gotten ourselves into, Jesus stands by us.

In today's sermon, we'll learn three signs in ASL and talk about three important parts of Jesus' journey – his death, resurrection and ascension. I'll get into some detail about today's part of the story, and we'll end right where the disciples did, at the great scriptural cliff hanger that is the Ascension.

First, three words in ASL - death, resurrection and ascension.

The same baby Jesus we celebrate at Christmas is the Jesus we mourn on Good Friday. And in the years that made up his earthly ministry, Jesus turned water into wine, called fishermen to drop their nets and become fishers of men, healed a multitude of people, raised Lazarus from the dead and taught us about the kingdom of Heaven and the love of God. He taught, preached, fed people, loved the outcasts and called us, all of us, his friends. Not friends in the Facebook sense, but close friends, important friends, friends who are worth showing up for, worth working with, worth sacrificing for.

Through his earthly ministry, he taught us that the ways of God are not the ways of the world. He showed us how to love and challenged us to love one another the way he loves us. That's a mighty, powerful, self-sacrificing kind of love!

What the world sees as weakness, he teaches us is strength. The last will be first and the first will be last. Nothing is more important than love and in love we are to take care of the world and one another. Armed with love we are to stand up to injustice and serve as shining examples of how to respect the dignity of every human being.

This is the Jesus about whom we speak when we confess our faith using the words of the Nicene Creed.

...For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day, he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end."

We spend most of the church year hearing what scripture has to say about the life of Jesus.

During Holy Week we remember his passion and his death.

On Easter Sunday we proclaim the Resurrection, and throughout Eastertide, we celebrate and learn about his encounters with the disciples and others after he came back from the dead.

During the 40 days following the resurrection, Jesus appeared many times. The disciples had a little trouble recognizing him. They, too, needed to come to understand that this is the same Jesus whom they lived with and loved. As Jesus came to the end of his time with them, just before the Ascension, he told the disciples that they would receive a great and powerful gift but that, first, they would have to wait.

Waiting is important. It is during this time that they process all that they have seen, heard and experienced. It is the time they need to come to a deeper understanding.

Jesus tells them to wait for the "promise of the Father," for the pouring out of the Holy Spirit which is to come soon. And the disciples respond by asking, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"

That's what they expected of the Messiah – someone who would restore the kingdom to Israel. But what Jesus came to do is much, much more than that. His mission, it

turns out, is not just about saving Israel but about saving everyone – even their enemies, the Romans.

Jesus wants them to broaden their vision and explains that they will be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

And after he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight...” and they stood amazed. Then, suddenly, two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? They are not to stand and stare any longer. They are to go and wait and pray and process.

Today is Ascension Sunday, the day we remember and celebrate Jesus’ rising up and returning to heaven. This is a really important part of the story. We need to remember his death, proclaim his resurrection, celebrate his ascension and wait for the rest of the story.

Today we will leave the disciples a little stunned, amazed, and perplexed. They need to go and wait a while. Why? Because they are about to become more than they ever thought they could be; stronger, bolder, braver than they ever imagined. They themselves are in the midst of a transformation, a change in perspective which will lead to them to be open, ready to receive the tremendous gift which is about to be poured out on them.

We need to wait for the same reason. As we remember and process all that has happened, we, too, can be transformed more and more into the likeness that God intends for us.

Some would say that these are just stories. That, even if Jesus was once here on earth, he’s not anymore. And, though it’s true that his physical presence is not here, because he ascended into heaven, he remains with us in symbolic and powerful images, in the love of those who take after him, and in the amazing work of his followers.

This God who dwelled among us as a man in the form of Jesus of Nazareth set up and started a mission, it is our job to continue that very important work.

What are we to do? We are to be the peacemakers, the love-bearers, the ones who bring an amazing message of hope for the world. Until his coming again, we are to be Christ for one another and the world.

Jesus was born in Bethlehem, lived an amazing life, was crucified, died and was buried, who on the third day, rose from the dead. And now we remember his ascending into heaven but today's scripture leaves us with a holy cliff-hanger. You'll have to wait until next week for the rest of the story.

This is our time of waiting so we can process and prepare. Think back on all you know about Jesus' life and teaching. Read the scripture, remember the stories, recall his words and pray. God wants to do great things through you.

Not many days from now, we will remember and celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit and the transformation we are each invited to experience in a very personal way as we step up and offer ourselves as the continuing disciples in the Jesus Movement.

Come Holy Spirit, come. We long for you to pour out your power and strength. Until then, open our hearts and minds, and stay with us as we wait. In the name of the one God who created us, redeemed us, and who longs to set our hearts on fire. Amen.