

Seventh Sunday of Easter (Year A)

24 May 2020

Cathedral Church of Peter, St Petersburg

✠ I speak to you in the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

I had such big plans for Ascension Day.

The Feast of the Ascension was this past Thursday. The Prayer Book clearly identifies Ascension Day as one of the seven principal feasts of the church year, and yet hardly anyone celebrates it on its proper day. I've been griping about this for years, and this year I was determined to do justice to my favorite feast of the church year. So I had such big plans for Ascension Day. It would be a celebration not just for us but for the whole St Petersburg deanery, with a guest preacher, as many as possible of the deanery clergy taking roles in the liturgy, a choral setting of the Eucharist, incense. We were really going to do it up right.

So yeah, I had such big plans for Ascension Day. But of course then the unexpected happened.

The disciples too had big plans. "When the apostles had come together, they asked Jesus, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?'" There would be sovereignty again, and independence, and national self-respect; there would be the glory of a people united under God's law, owing no allegiance to anyone but the Most High. They were really going to do it up right.

So yeah, the disciples had big plans. But of course then the unexpected happened.

Jesus just . . . left. "As they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight." And now what? They simply don't know what to do. They just stand there, looking up—and just try to imagine what they were thinking, what they were feeling. Was this it? Jesus had been coming and going in unexpected ways ever since his resurrection forty days ago, so maybe he was coming back; but this departure seemed to have something unusually definitive

about it. They must have been perplexed, bereft. Was this *it*?

No wonder they just stood there, looking up into the sky in disbelief, in wonderment, in confusion. And, well, you know the disciples—we're disciples ourselves, and it's pretty easy to imagine how we'd get stuck right there, mesmerized by the sudden loss, unable even to begin thinking about what the new normal could possibly look like—so they need a nudge. Two messengers in white robes suddenly appear and say, "Guys, come on. Why are you standing there, looking up toward heaven? Jesus has been taken up to heaven, and he'll come back from there."

In the meantime, Jesus had told them what to do. Go back to headquarters and await the coming of the Holy Spirit.

And that's where we are today, on the Sunday after the Ascension. Jesus has departed for his Father's right hand, the Holy Spirit has not yet been given, and the disciples are in one of those in-between times that perhaps we know all too well. How are we to live in the in-between times?

I like to emphasize the glory of the Ascension, but there is also great sadness and perplexity in the Ascension. The disciples are left standing there, looking up to heaven, bereft, comfortless. Maybe you know something of that feeling right now. And I'm not just talking about the pandemic. It is the condition of our life on this side of heaven, is it not? There is always loss, always the withdrawal of comfort. Our lives shrink. We grow old, or infirm, or disillusioned, or disenchanted—and old pleasures are withdrawn, or lose their savor, and our lives shrink. A friend, a spouse, a loved one dies, and our lives shrink. Troubles come, and overwhelm us, and we feel comfortless, and our lives shrink. In the midst of life we are in one death after another.

I know you must know what I mean. Many of you, I am sure, are experiencing that shrinking, that withdrawal of comfort. It is absolutely the wrong thing to say that this does not matter, that if we only have faith, we will have victory. It is profoundly un-Christian, profoundly untrue to the Ascension, to pretend that those deaths are not deaths, that those wounds are not wounds. Christ takes our

human nature to the Father's right hand, blessed, as ours will some day be blessed, but also wounded, as ours is wounded. Before the exaltation, in the making of the scars there is great pain. The wounds are now, the exaltation is not yet, and we are caught in between, bereft, comfortless.

What are we going to do with the in-between times? What are we going to do when comfort is withdrawn, when we feel bereft, when our lives shrink, when the discouragement or fear or anxiety of the in-between times could overwhelm us? We need Luke's messengers in white robes to tell us not just to stand there looking up into heaven—fixed in place, thinking of what is lost. Why are you standing there? Christians, this Lord Jesus shall return again. So get together, devote yourselves to prayer, and especially to prayer with the other disciples. The Holy Spirit, the Comforter, doesn't descend on people privately. The Holy Spirit descends on the disciples gathered together, disciples who weren't sure what else to do in the in-between times but to pray, and to pray together.

They had had such big plans, but those were all gone now. So how did they manage it, these bereft, comfortless disciples? How did they manage to tear themselves away from looking up into heaven, and trudge back to Jerusalem to pray together and await the coming of the Spirit? It could only be because they had known the glory.

Have you known the glory? Have you caught a glimpse—just a glimpse—of the glory that lies on the other side of the gulf between the now and the not yet? Oh, my brothers and sisters, I pray that you have. For I have known the glory. I have known the glory in music that has lifted me up to the very throne of grace. I have known the glory in the word fitly preached, in the Body reverently broken and the Blood graciously poured. I have known the glory of God's boundless pardon in the giving and receiving of absolution. I have known the glory in the compassion and care and generosity and hospitality I have experienced among you, the people of God in this place. I have known the glory in the looks of awe and wonder, in the smiles and the tears, that I have seen at the altar rail. I have known the glory—and because I have known the glory I will not be comfortless when I am caught in between the now and the not yet.

What the disciples didn't know, couldn't know, was that their big plans were much too small, that the glory of God's surprising grace surpasses all that they could desire. Restore the kingdom to Israel? No. By his blood he had redeemed for God, from every family, language, people, and nation, a royal priesthood to serve our God. The promised Holy Spirit would confound their plans, shatter their dreams, and bring a glory beyond anything they could imagine.

And my big plans? Still caught in between the now and the not yet. Am I disheartened? How could I not be? And yet. And yet I have known the glory before, and I feel certain that the glory of God's unexpected grace will always be better than the biggest and best of my own plans. I believe in the glory. And because I believe it, I am resolved not to stand looking up to heaven. Because I believe it, I have managed to get myself here, back at headquarters, with my fellow disciples, by whatever means they might be present, delighting in the glory that is now, and longing for the glory that is not yet, and patiently waiting for the promised Holy Spirit.

Come, Holy Spirit. Come, Holy Spirit.