

ACTS 1:1-11

PSALM 47

EPHESIANS 1-15-23

LUKE 24:44-53

Seventh Sunday of Easter; Ascension of the Lord

May 21, 2023; Year A

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)

He Has Left the Building!

The irony of Tim LaHaye's infamous "rapture" infused "Left Behind" series is that these popular books are, frankly, much ado about nothing. Depicting a sordid fictional prognostication describing the presumably horrific events predicated on and predicted to happen upon Jesus' presumed return to earth, his second coming (*Parousia*), not happening! In what would be a final showdown between good and evil, an epic Armageddon like apocalyptic battle, do not worry nor give it the time of day! After all, Jesus left the bounds of this world behind a long, long, time ago and two thousand years' worth of history are serious indicators that he is not coming back despite biblical promises to the contrary! A running joke over the last few decades is that Elvis has left the building! Well, so has Jesus! No, despite these two larger-than-life figures being inextricably linked by some backwards, backwoods, crazies in the south, they are not one in the same person, no relation whatsoever! Let's be clear! And for those of us who follow his lead, that is, Jesus, not Elvis, this reality is anything but bad news. It is the best news of all, all of us living in the light and the shadow of a most fabulous legacy, an heirloom of Christly mysterious presence that guides us day by day, divine energy allowing us a subtle but most substantive sense of the closest, breathiest, holy otherness, giving us at least the slightest hint, a glimpse, a whiff, of direction, indeed, reminding us of the subtlety of holy presence, the Spirit always in the mix, blowing like the wind, surrounding us, deeply embedded within our spirits. Ascension reminds us not of absence, but of presence, God's sustaining Advocate, called Paraclete in the Greek, a word that appropriately has no equivalent translation, something intangibly imbued but very real within us that

tells us that God, against all odds, is divinely gracing us in the mix, in the midst, of our daily lives, contrary to every doubt that seeks to overwhelm us daily, especially haunting us in the dark nights of the soul that we all experience on occasion, no exceptions! Today is good news, gospel news, God news, and it is a word we desperately need in our lives, both individually and corporately. No matter a literal or figurative, a historical or metaphorical, “event”, **Ascension forces us to become our best selves, self-sufficient in the magnificent way God created, deigned and designed for all of us to be, all of us richly learning as we go as we learn to trust in the Spirit that seems elusively evasive but is as pervasively prevalent as the wind.**

The early Church had a dilemma! After a supposed adventurous trip to hell during his three-day siesta in the tomb, Jesus had been raised from the dead and was back with his followers, appearing first to his remaining eleven disciples, no doubt giving them feelings of bewilderment, euphoria, and absolute glee. He’s baaaaaack! Wow! This Jesus really does have staying power! Breathing sighs of relief, surely, they all had the sensation that all was now well because their topsy turvy, upside down, Humpty Dumpty world had been righted. All now seemed right with their world! Everything had magically and mysteriously returned to normal as new as that normal now seemed. Time for a redirect, to recalibrate and retrofit, as they leaned into resurrection reality. Surely, the disciples thought to themselves, we will now go back to the way we were, Barbara Streisand image, the way things were, helplessly and hopelessly dependent on this rabbi they had dutifully, obediently, and happily followed for three excitingly adventuresome and fulfilling years. Oh, if only we could freeze time in a bottle and stay in this moment forever. Jesus had other plans! Earthly life for this resurrected one eventually called Christ turned out to be a quick turnaround, a weigh station on the way to somewhere else, elsewhere, significant as this layover was, a temporary stopover, an interim allowing him to right the ship, make sure the crew was shipshape, allowing the captain to shove off for points unknown, set sailing into the sunset of an eternal sunrise, bon voyage to all. His presence was like a tease, the disciples once again getting a taste of life with their rabbi, their brother, friend and mentor, ah, the memories, and now he tells them he is leaving again, and that the future of this fledgling movement is now placed in their capable hands. Twice the hurt! Twice the pain! Twice the abandonment! Yes, a

trinitarian nightmare! Oh, they were ready! **Jesus knew they were ready! They had earned their wings like eagles, their leader confident, their teacher knowing full well they could soar. But there is always doubt, fear of the first flight, every flight, no copilot, soloing as a group with all the responsibility that was being swiftly and suddenly thrust upon them, knowing now they were accountable to one another and to God, leaning heavily on this promised Spirit of promise that would soon come their way. Yea, tell me another one! Famous last words, everything will be okay, you can do this! And then you are on your own even if and when you are not! The instruction manual was still being written! We get to read all of it when we choose!**

The writers of the Gospels and the book of Acts had a dilemma, a major problem, what to do with Jesus. He was in the way! He had to be out of the picture. He had to go, yes, far, far, away! And so, these composers did what any good writer would do, they simply wrote him out of the script, removing him from the storyline, finding a convenient way to get rid of him. Exit stage left! Genius! It is important to note, as many scholars do, that this story is like many others about Jesus, comparing him with some all-stars from the Hebrew Bible, specifically Moses and Elijah. This time, Jesus ascends without the aid of a chariot, yes, one upping Elijah. “Anything you can do, I can do better!” Or did something amazingly phenomenal happen, that he really ascended out of sight beyond the finite grasp of the surly bonds of earth? John Shelby Spong once said that if this story were historically accurate, knowing what we now know about the universe, Jesus would still be in orbit! On the other hand, come to think of it, there is no historical record describing a second death of Jesus along with another burial, despite conspiracy theories—we all know what they are worth—alternative facts we believe, fake news we think, one such rumor claiming to have found him in an ossuary, a burial box along with Mary his mother, Mary Magdalene, and, of course, his child Judah. Oh my, as the late sports commentator Dick Enberg used to say! Oh, the intrigue, the speculation! Happy hunting! **Luke tells us that Jesus “led them out as far as Bethany, where he lifted his hands and blessed them. As he blessed them, he left them and was taken up to heaven.” In Luke’s other version, from the book of Acts, the writer says, “After Jesus said these things, as they were watching, he was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight.” In many ways this disappearing act, a strange phenomenon in every**

respect, is nothing new but looks very familiar, much like the times in the resurrection narratives we have just read during Eastertide where Jesus simply suddenly appears and disappears, vanishing into thin air. Was it real? Was it smoke and mirrors? Was it history? Was it metaphor? All the above? That is all up to you! In the final analysis we believe by faith not by fact as much as we love factual information when and where we can get it!

So, where does that leave us? I believe it leaves us in a very good place, a wonderful sacred space. In Jesus' absence, however that took place, and his being gone is a two thousand plus year fact, we have been graced with the Spirit of God replacing his physical presence, taking his place here on earth, assuring us that the Christ is present in our lives and in our world even when our lives and our world go to hell in a handbasket. Jesus promised that the Spirit would be with us, not that the Spirit would fix our problems, putting band aids on our many natural and human made boo boos, but that the Spirit would accompany us on our journeys. Jesus' leaving is a sobering reminder that it is imperative that we grow up, mature, evolve, yes, to become self-sufficient to a degree, and thus it is incumbent upon us to learn, to study, making every effort to create our best selves. Our lives depend on it! In so doing, our relationships, with God and with one another, become interdependent not dependent or codependent, learning best practice for loving God, neighbor, and self, fulfilling the Shema in Deuteronomy 6, the Holiness Code in Leviticus 19, and Jesus' goal for all humanity in the Gospel renditions of this ancient covenantal commandment. But, deep down, we know we never fly without a parachute! Jesus promised us community which became the Church after it took leave, permanently separated from the faith tradition that birthed it. We want a crystal-clear reminder of the presence of God, even a hint of awe and wonder inspiring and inspiriting transcendent mystery, in our lives and in our global village. Look around you on the faces of your fellow faith travelers, those who have chosen to join together with you on this sacred journey and make this church their home. Yes, we get to choose those with whom we worship, have fellowship, break bread, and enjoy. Beats a forced family reunion any day of the week! It is not just our belief and faith, but it is each and every one of us together, who we are, that form the ties that bind. Every time we gather for whatever purpose we choose to gather, I am always warmed by the spirit in the room, the true love that is displayed among the members of this

church. Folks, I have been around the ecclesial barn a few times. This kind, this level, of care and compassion, true, genuine, authentic, community does not happen in every congregation. I have seen the dark side of nasty congregational systems, even to the point of having to call the police to intervene. Do not take what you have for granted! Enjoy each delicious morsel, each tasty moment of it!

The Apostle Paul, writing to the church at Ephesus, tells the Ephesians in his care and under his watchful eye, that, having heard of their faith and their love for all people that this letter writing follower of Christ prays for them constantly, remembering them with fondness in his prayers, specifically that God would give them “a spirit of wisdom and revelation that makes God known. . .” And I just love the next line as Paul wishfully writes, “I pray that the eyes of your heart will have enough light to see what is the hope of God’s call, what is the richness of God’s glorious inheritance among believers, and what is the overwhelming greatness of God’s power that is working among us believers.” Think about this wonderful phrase, “the eyes of your heart!” Wow, what a visual image, literally! Yes, our hearts, a metaphor imaging the source of life, are windows into our very spirits, our very souls, reflecting and revealing who we are, as transparent as day. Hearts can be broken, and they can mend, but no one fools the heart! Paul then adds, “This power is conferred by the energy of God’s powerful strength!” How many times, in our hopelessly vain efforts to describe the nature of God, a theological landmine, a desert of empty space overflowing with our wildest imagination, that we simply conclude, saying that in the final analysis that whoever, whatever, God is, that God is eternal energy, and that divine energy powers all creation, all the universe, and everything within it, including you and me. That holy energy is part and parcel of who we are as the created images of God, part of a created order crafted out of chaos, gloriously described by the Holy as not just “good,” but “very good!” It is this energy that is the power of life, of resurrection, of Ascension, the power that raised Jesus and raises us every time we think we are beaten down to the dust, downtrodden, depressed distressed, and defeated over all the negative slings and arrows, a little Shakespeare for good measure here, that challenge us and threaten our personal and communal peace and civility, seeking to damage and devour our very existence. Life wins! Death loses! Every time! All the time! Death! Where is its sting? Its stinger has been permanently removed!

Paul concludes today's lection from the epistle to the Ephesians with the reminder that the God who raised Christ and raises us has put everything under Christ who is the head of the Church and the churches, and that we are the beneficiaries. As card carrying members of this local part of the one holy, catholic, apostolic, universal, club are grafted as part of Christ's very body, one and many, and that it is this fullness, the Christly Spirit within and among us, as we live our lives, going about our daily tasks who, according to Paul, "fills everything in every way!" These are powerful Pauline words! These are affirmations, promises, that do not come our way if Jesus is still invading our personal space, insecurely hovering like an anxious busybody, obsessing that we cannot get it right. **Christ has set us free to allow his Christly Spirit to move within and among us, to function, to operate fully, and to embolden and empower us to become all we can be, to live our lives to the fullest even as he did as the man from Nazareth who lived his life to the fullest, his way, God's way, preaching and teaching and gracing and healing. It all comes full circle for each and every one of us!** And it is most obvious when we are together as the gathered church in whatever capacity we have chosen to meet.

So, the word that I would offer on this Ascension Day 2023 is a word of hope and encouragement, a word of promise, that minus the presence of Jesus, in his absentia, is the fulfillment that we are blessed with the presence of Christ. Ascension is a reminder that when it comes to matters of faith we are called to trust, indeed, to live by faith and not by sight, to experience things that are unseen and yet realized in the rare, serendipitous moments when the still, small, voice subtly nudges us in the nuance of our lives. Perhaps the lesson we need to learn, what we need to know deep within our being, is that there is a gracious gift in this supposed divine absence and that "present" is a mystical presence of unspeakable riches. Yes, Jesus has bequeathed to us the grandest offering in his last will and testament, yes, literally! We read about it every time we open the good book! Yes, we walk by faith and not by sight, trusting the Spirit to lead, guide, and direct us, never manipulating or micromanaging our lives, allowing us the freedom to be fully human, including our mistakes, every time we err, just the way we were intended to be from the foundation of the earth. Yes, Jesus has left the building and it is a good thing. In his leaving, we are left with a life of

**abundance and generosity, the very best, all our potential continually before us, all that is possible, all of life intended by God for the human creature, including of course, you and me. All this unlimited capacity because “he” is not here!
Thanks be to God!**

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and in absentia is always present with us, a mystery wrapped in much enigma! Makes perfect sense! Amen and amen.