

Seventh Sunday of Easter

ACTS 1:15-17, 21-26

PSALM 1

I JOHN 5:9-13

JOHN 17:6-19

Ascension of the Lord

ACTS 1:1-11

PSALM 47

EPHESIANS 1:15-23

LUKE 24:44-53

May 12, 2024

Out of This World!

Way back when I was a young, conservative, evangelistic type of the Southern Baptist persuasion, adorned with brightly colored polyester suits blinged with cross lapel pins and other religious accoutrement, irrelevant conversations would often arise during inane but not at all heated theological debates about the fact that while we confidently, yes, even arrogantly, securely-saved souls were to be in the world, we were to self-righteously and piously to not be of the world, as if that could possibly ever be done. Think of the biblical image of getting a camel through the eye of the needle! And how many angels can dance on the head of a pin? Inquiring minds want to know! Yes, we naïve religious novitiates obviously had way too much time on our hands as college student BSU boys and girls, that is Baptist Student Union for you great unwashed. I mean, seriously, where else would we be other than having our feet firmly planted on the terra firma of planet earth? Well, today we read those fascinating, if not strange, a bit odd, bizarre, texts, declaring for all the world to read that Jesus was out of this world, figuratively for many, literally for some. One of the challenging things about preaching these various post-resurrection narratives during the long fifty-day season of Eastertide, while

including Pentecost and Trinity thrown in for good measure, is that they demand from us intense, yes, intentional, theological inquiry, serious consideration, contemplation, and conversation, including personal and communal reflection, requiring us to ponder images, that while many of the faithful do not consider historical, others still do. These epic stories were poignantly placed by writers seeking to convey a larger-than-life message about larger-than-life personalities, in this case Jesus. They creatively penned and situated these narratives within the confines of history. That is why every year it seems that I stick it to Dale Bishop by having him preach Trinity in my timely absence, running away and hiding, leaving that complex, complicated, and convoluted theological conundrum for him to figure out in a sermon! Paybacks are hell! Trinity is coming to a church near you on May 26th. For many sincere Christians a literal understanding, that these purported “events”, despite written for a pre-scientific world, insist that these purported episodes happened in real time in exactly the way that the biblical narrative describes them. For these believers this traditional viewpoint is the only option, no wriggle room, no room for doubt—Jimmy Buffet image here—no deviation possible in any way whatsoever. The text says what it means and means what it says! Yes, those disciples are claimed to have been direct eyewitnesses and the writers, many years later, were apparently put into a trance, hypnotized, and then dictated verbatim by God above the exact details of this other worldly episode. Uh huh! For many other sincere Christians, including many in this room, that leaves us with nowhere to go, with no reasonable, rational, with no suitable, viable alternative that allows us to make sense of these farfetched, outrageous, proclamations made by the Lukan writer in both the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. For the skeptics bordering on cynics, full of deep-seated and well-informed doubt as to the veracity of these audacious claims, this should be the stuff, this mythologically wondrous hyperbole, yes, this should be the very essence, of mystery, the awe and wonder produced by transcendence. I think you know my take, my

position! Whether we receive the story as figurative, metaphorical, mythological, language, or as a literal, historical, depiction of an actual event, however, the fact remains that Jesus has left the planet, is out of this world and we are here, and it is our lot in life as people of faith, Christian faith, followers of the way of Jesus, Christ Jesus, to figure out what all these mystical words mean for us and determine for us, revealing clearly, fully, exactly who we should be and what we should do. In that regard we are all in the same boat together, in that we are one, to use a Johannine image frequently repeated in the United Church of Christ, and the world needs a serious dose of what Jesus continues to offer, what the man from Galilee provides, that same lovingly gracious, merciful and peaceful stuff now that he is gone, all of which he freely and gladly gave when he was here, needed as much now as ever, if not even more so if that is possible.

The early Church had a dilemma, a very real conundrum, a serious problem indeed! Jesus had been crucified, executed as a common criminal at the hands of Rome, but was now regarded, believed to be, by a host of his passionate followers, as resurrected, yes, risen indeed, whatever resurrection meant and continues to mean, once again the metaphorical and the literal intractably interconnected, enmeshed to the highest degree, dividing and merging and all at the same time. The problem was that once again Jesus, like three-day old company, was still in the picture, back in the picture, yes, lingering like a great white elephant in the room, the disciples delightfully, gleefully, assuming, and hoping, that everything was returning to normal. Surely, they were thinking that they were all going back to the good old days, the way it used to be, salad days, roaming the countryside, Camelot days, days of wine, lots of wine, and roses, well thorns, and that they would continue to operate as if nothing bad had ever happened, as if nothing had changed, everyone living happily ever after. When reality becomes delusion and vice versa, we have a problem. Jesus had to go! Again! How do you get rid of him, make him go away in a way that

would be fitting, suitable, honorable, for someone worthy of all the praise, all the hype. Just how would you politely eliminate for good the post-resurrected , post-resurrection Jesus, yes, this one understood to be the Christ, the Messiah, the very Son of God? Well, ascension is just the solution, literally the ticket to paradise! And so unlike Elijah, who needed a fiery chariot to ascend to the heavens, the Gospel writers always making sure that Jesus superseded Moses and the Law and all the prophets, outdoing them in every way imaginable, Jesus needed no external propulsion, no booster rockets, to achieve liftoff, to bodily, physically, extend beyond the bounds of sight, thrust into the heavenly places, slipping the bonds of earth, space and time, transcending the friendly skies. **Out of sight but never out of mind!** Yes, like a Jewish space laser, sorry about that MTG! Couldn't resist! He simply and suddenly left ground zero, levitating as if on command, leaving earth behind, slowly, perhaps quickly, ascending into and above the clouds, leaving the disciples once again speechless, amazed at the great sight they were beholding. He was out of sight, out of this world, but, just to reiterate, never out of their minds, or ours! "Galileans, why are you standing here, looking toward heaven?" Well, what else would you have expected them to do? Agnostic biblical scholar Bart Ehrman raises the question that should be on everyone's mind, "When did Jesus become God?" The problem with literalizing this story, citing the wisdom of the late John Shelby Spong, as he acknowledged the unlimited vastness of the universe, is that if ascension happened in the literal way the story proclaims, Jesus would still be in orbit today! Once again, questions abound, our curiosity overwhelming our senses. **No matter our interpretation, our understanding, ascension provides for us, offering another major inflection point in the Jesus story and we have no choice but to wrestle with it. Wrestle with it we must! Wrestle with it we may! Wrestle with it we will!**

So, let us go back to square one and ponder this life, this past, present, and future life, without the physical presence of the bodily

Jesus in our midst, but surely experiencing the manifestation of the Christly presence of the Spirit in our midst, in our lives and in our world, within our contemporary context. What does it all mean? Today, I have taken the liberty of choosing the Acts lection from Ascension of the Lord and combined it with the Gospel lection from the Seventh Sunday of Easter as we put a tidy ribbon on another glorious season of Eastertide. The Gospel of John offers some reminders, gives us some promises into which I think we can sink our faithful teeth. In anticipation of another Pentecost celebration, a high and holy feast day we will observe next Sunday, a wonderful liturgical festival that should be right up there, regarded like Christmas and Easter—please wear something red—we are reminded that in Jesus' leaving we are left with a wonderful legacy, a bounteous harvest of goodness and grace, the assurance that God is with us and that we are not alone because we are privy to read about everything that Jesus brought to his followers and know that these cornerstones, these touchstones, are forever ours to behold as long as we have breath and until we are permanently united with the one who awaits our own ascension into the mystery of a heavenly eternity. Jesus is out of this world, and we are in this world, and all is well because that is the case, just the way it is.

So, does that mean we simply sit around and sing Kum ba Yah until our number is called, our ticket is punched? Oh no! There is much to do, much work to do, many deeds of service to engage. During this interim we call our earthly, mortal, temporal lives, our time on this planet in the here and now, our lives in real time with each breath we take and each day we live, we are to be constantly, continuously, busy about the business of God. Yes, all of us have been uniquely empowered to diligently, passionately, share the good news that is gospel and carry out the good works of Christ Jesus. All the wonders that John claims are ours to behold, claimed to be the very promises made by Jesus himself as he prepared to leave the first time, are

entrusted to our hands to share as we gratefully offer the kinds of cups of cold water to every human being, yes, the very gifts of God that are truly out of this world. This world is not merely a launching pad designed to get us to the next level, to propel us into the next life as if we are climbing Jacob's ladder, but it is our home, in this life our one and only home, albeit temporary for all, and our job one, our task at hand, is to make this global orb, this divinely inspired planet the best that it can be. We are to continue to build upon everything God called good, no very good! This planet, all creation, is our responsibility! We are accountable to God, to one another, and to all creation to insure that this hospitable biosphere designed for all life forms is maintained just as, exactly the way, the Holy One intended for us to do from its inception. This kind of dominion has been our trust from the time when creation was first conceived, creation being an ongoing process, or should be, that continues now and will continue infinitum, unless we destroy it in the seemingly unlimited demonic, perverse, ways we have cruelly created with all the destructive potential and capability inherently built within. Yes, we have free reign, and we get to make all the decisions about our engagement of the environment and its resources. This dominion, biblical dominion, is not about controlling and dominating, manipulating and subduing, yes, destroying, but rather demands immense care, concern, and compassion, all our actions mirroring our accountability to our creator. We have received a wonderful legacy, an heirloom of the finest everything, and it is our joy and our responsibility to share this good news, this grace abundant, this overflowing generosity with everyone we meet. These blessings are not ours to hoard, to preserve or protect, but are by design intended to be given away, knowing that they will multiply, always growing within us and beyond us. We indeed have received grace upon grace, and we are called to deliver, to give grace upon grace.

The writer of the letter to Ephesians, supposedly penned at the hand of the apostle Paul, tells us that “God put everything under Christ’s feet and made him head of everything in the church, which is his body. His body, the church, is the fullness of Christ, who fills everything in every way.” Yes, we are the fullness, the fulfillment, of Christ! As emissaries of Jesus, the man from Nazareth, we are the embodiment of Christ! And indeed, Christ has empowered us with this same empowerment of Christ to be Christ in the world, to be Christ’s to everyone and in every situation, embodying the very essence of love in this world in an out of this world way. As the apostle Paul says in his second letter to the Corinthian church, “We have these treasures in earthen vessels.” Folks, we are the earthen vessels” (II Corinthians 4:7). In the Gospel of John, we read today words the writer attributes to a prayer prayed by Jesus asking for our protection, our safety, our wellbeing. Our sacred task, our sacred calling, is to bring good into the world, that the world and all those who dwell therein, as the Psalmist says, can become their best, to live up to their highest potential, yes, to become all that they can be, all that God meant for them to be, all that the Holy One intended for them to be. The highest thing, the highest honor, we are blessed to have is the call to bend in humble service even as Jesus once instructed us and demonstrated for us, we in turn being Christ to one another and especially to others. Now that is ascension! That will preach! That goal will indeed fly! Theology, including confounding and confusing biblical notions that became doctrines, Church Tradition, Church teaching, theology is meant to serve humanity, humanity not meant to serve theology! May thoughts ascend on high this day, our prayers reaching to the Holy, our aspirations as high as we can imagine. Yes, we are in the world and may indeed be not of the world, but what we are called to be and to do is absolutely out of this world, yes, out of this world stuff!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and has indeed placed a higher calling upon us all, an ascension for each one of us right hear and right now! Amen and amen!