

May 24, 2020. Ascension Sunday & Memorial Day Sunday

Acts 1:1-14

Rev. Karin Kilpatric - First United Church of Arvada

This story, which opens the book of Acts, is the portrayal of Jesus ascending into the heavens. We are told, Jesus took his disciples to the Mount of Olivet and “as they were watching, he was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight.” In Christian tradition, the Easter Season represents the time in which Christ was present in a resurrected spirit and walked and talked with his disciples.

Ascension Day, 40 days later, commemorates the moment in which the risen Christ ascended into the company of the heavens. The season of Ascension began this past Thursday, and will continue for 10 days, until next Sunday, Pentecost Sunday, the day on which the Holy Spirit, symbolized by a dove, came into the hearts of all gathered- the day recognized as the birthday of the Christian Church.

Though Ascension Day has become an almost forgotten festival in our time, we continue to faithfully tell the story and through our contemplation of its mystery, keep it alive. We may wonder how this image of Christ being lifted up into the heavens fits into our modern understandings-- as empirically grounded people, living within a scientific perspective. Certainly, stories like this one have emerged out of a worldview of another time and place. Yet, I sincerely hope we will not give up on this ancient story and the spiritual truth it contains for people of all times. It speaks not of magic but of the height, depth and breadth of the workings of the divine spirit. If we dissect a story like this one with the biases and limitations of a materialist perspective, (either something is a fact, or it is not a fact) we will continue to miss the profound message it has for this earth and for each of our lives. The fact that we don't understand the story fully-- can grasp its message only in part-- doesn't make the story archaic and dispensable. Like so many stories in biblical scripture it presents a mystery to contemplate. It confounds us and that is good. In this world directed by fear, myopic vision and increasing isolation, many land in the dead end of skepticism and others in a quagmire of obstinate fundamentalism. In this world where the agnostic reflex predominates, the ancient stories and images of the divine mysteries of our Christian tradition give us pause. But this pause needn't be concern about, or doubt as to, their merit. We can be given pause to take in the mood of the story—to ponder the images it evokes. The image of clouds is a veil beyond which we cannot see. The billowy cathedral above the disciples that wrapped around the teacher they knew so well and lifted him up and transported him into the spiritual beyond was not the end---only the beginning. It provoked their spiritual imaginations to wonder. What was this world that lay just beyond their knowing? Their growing trust was now strengthened into a lived understanding that the earth and the heavens were eternally united. Each year as we enter this time of ascension, our own souls must rise to attention. We must pause in the silence, look around in awe at nature reaching upward, and at shafts of light coming to earth through the billowing clouds. We must enter into the mood of Ascension and allow ourselves to pause in the possibility of spiritual perception and spiritual feeling. We must approach the story and its imagery

with reverence and allow ourselves an experience of life-giving joy. Like the star over the manger on a Bethlehem night, the stark cross on a hill of death at Golgotha, an empty tomb on Easter morning, this “lifting into heaven” will never be comprehended fully, but if we merely explain it away, the veil of the mystery will never be parted—not even for a peak.

The season of Ascension is no less than a festival of angels and archangels, whose loving consciousness allows us to feel the ascending Christ in our own spirits and inspires us to heed the call to gaze beyond our perceptions. With our scientific feet on the ground, we are called to find the crack in our interpretations-- and to rediscover that behind the exquisitely mechanical ordering and motion of the stars and planets is an invisible spiritual force directing their course. It asks us to look around at the ascendant impulses of the life of all nature at this time of the year, of the plants that shoot out of the earth seeking their life in the light of the sun, and to look up at the evening stars with their points of light and sense the force of what is invisible and yet profoundly present in our universe. This past Thursday my 93-year-old mother had a pace maker put in to control the abnormal rhythms of her heart. No one was allowed to go to the hospital. So, at 7 am, my sisters and I began communicating our feelings and sharing our prayers for her through texts on our phones. I reminded them that it was Ascension Day, a day to contemplate the heavens—to feel the power and light from above and to bask in its warmth and trust in that which brings and sustains life.

There is so much reality that cannot be seen with the human eye. Lasting myths, like the Ascension, hold a reality, which bring a needed balance to the sense perceptions and rational explanations that direct much of our lives. Both religion and science ought to humble us with their truth, not blind us in arrogant competition about *what* we know and *how* we know it. Religion can remind us that our organs of perception go beyond our five senses. Science can fill us with awe about the nature of material reality, its beauty, its intelligence, its order, and its possibility. The ancient images hold spiritual truths that will comfort the agnostic modern soul if we can sit without judgment before them. This is the power of religious mythology. It doesn't just invoke wishful thinking or naïve sentimentality. These stories as concentrated points of light don't give us answers but rather expand our perceptions and bless our lives. Ascension Day offers us no less than a time to bear in mind that our dignity and our wellbeing is a concern of the heavens. And when each of us realizes that this is true of ourselves, we come to realize that is also true of the person next to us, and of all the vast numbers of human beings across the globe that we will never get to know. When we truly believe that human dignity and wellbeing are the concern of the heavens, our mercy and love toward others grows, our personal suffering is more readily accepted, and our losses gotten through without destroying our spirits. We can forgive ourselves for our mistakes and find the courage to take risks for things that really matter.

Any of you mothers who have given birth, surely remember your first glance at the tiny life that emerged from your own body. I remember being surprised by the overwhelming feeling of wonder I

immediately had. Where in the world, did she come from? This infant had the fingers and toes, ears and nose of the physical beings who had produced her, but she was more than a physical being biologically formed and ready to be fashioned by life events and culture. This child was a profound and mysterious gift from beyond the horizon of what I had ever known. One ordinary sunny morning she simply entered my life.

In my years of ministry, I have been privileged to be present at another kind of birth. That is the birth into death, the transition from this life into the life beyond. Despite the grief that the loss of a loved one evokes and the struggle of the physical and emotional body as it moves into death, there is also a powerful and humbling grace that enters a room on the occasion of a death. Those who open their hearts to be present to it stand humbly in its mystery. All is distilled down to its basic substance; the trivial and the insignificant details of life are brought suddenly to a halt. For a moment, at least, those present sense what really matters. They let go of control, because they know that there is no control and they join together, as if their grieving hearts will gain strength from each other. They pray, silently or aloud, in words or just with the breathing of their bodies and beating of their hearts to a God or a universal loving force who comes to meet them. This happens even to those folks who have long declared they don't believe in this kind of thing. Like the disciples on Ascension Day, they, too, climb the Mount of Olivet and let another spirit go, out of their sight, into the heavenly beyond. I will close today with a poem, by Malcolm Guite, an English poet, singer/songwriter and Anglican Priest. It is titled "Ascension."

We saw his light break through the cloud of
glory Whilst we were rooted still in time and
place As earth became a part of Heaven's story
And heaven opened to his human face. We saw
him go and yet we were not parted He took us
with him to the heart of things The heart that
broke for all the broken-hearted
Is whole and Heaven-centered now, and sings,
Sings in the strength that rises out of weakness,
Sings through the clouds that veil him from our sight,
Whilst we ourselves become his clouds of witness
And sing the waning darkness into light, His light in
us, and ours in him concealed, Which all creation
waits to see revealed .