

Easter7\_YrC\_050816\_mcr  
All Saints Episcopal Church

In the name of God. Amen.

Today is the seventh Sunday of Easter, or the Sunday after the Ascension. The Feast of the Ascension, a Principal Feast of the Church, takes place 40 days after Easter in our calendar. That makes it occur always on a Thursday, and it is never transferred to a Sunday, although we often sing hymns that refer to the Ascension on that Sunday following. If we were a "higher" church, liturgically, than we are, we would celebrate that feast day - and many others - on their appointed days. But we aren't. So we don't. And that's why I'm telling you about it now.

Luke writes about the event of Jesus' ascension twice, once in his Gospel and once in the Book of Acts, although they occur at different locations and points in time. The Gospel account occurs on the evening of Easter Day, after the disciples have encountered Jesus on the walk to Emmaus and when he appears to them later in the evening after they have returned to Jerusalem. This second encounter is more like a commissioning, where Jesus tells them that they are to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins in his name to all nations. Then he takes them outside and leads them as far as Bethany (remember, that is a Jerusalem suburb), blesses them and is "carried up into heaven." And that is the end of the Gospel of Luke.

The other account of Jesus' ascension is the first 11 verses of the first chapter of Acts. This time, it's 40 days after Easter, and Luke places Jesus and the disciples in Jerusalem, not Bethany, and Jesus promises the disciples that the Holy Spirit will come and lead them in his absence. Then he is lifted up, and a cloud takes him out of their sight. The disciples stand there, watching as he goes up, until two men in white robes appear beside them and say, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking up toward heaven?" In other words, "Don't just stand there, do something!"

The first ascension story is, of course, an ending. Jesus will not walk the earth again. This is goodbye. It is the end of Luke's Jesus story.

And yet, the same story, with a few differences, is the beginning of the story of the church. In Acts, Luke emphasizes *what to do now*. When the disciples want to know if this is the time for Jesus to restore the kingdom to Israel, he tells them,

"It is not for you to know the times..." implying that the newborn church should be about continuing his work instead of speculating about the future.

So the ascension is both an ending and a beginning.

How is that possible?

Well, in *Godly Play*, the lesson on the Circle of the Church Year explains how something can be both ending and beginning at the same time. I've talked about it once before, but I think it bears repeating.

Our modern, Western version of time is a line. We learn about making timelines in school to learn about the history of things - when and how our country was formed; the succession of the monarchy in Great Britain; the various stages of the development of a disease process. Even our own lives can be laid out in a line with our birth, intermediate stages of growth and development, and an end.

If this cord were to represent time, the beginning is new. But as time moves along, the beginning becomes old, and the end is what is new. So the beginning is like an ending and the ending is like a beginning.

Well, the Church took the line - the ending that is like a beginning and the beginning that is like an ending, and tied the two together, so that we would always remember that for every ending there is a beginning and for every beginning there is an ending.

Next week, we will end the season of Easter and begin the season of Pentecost - an ending and a beginning at the same time. The end of Jesus' time with the disciples on earth and the beginning of the church, called to continue Jesus' work in the world. The end of face to face with Jesus and the beginning of the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, empowering us to be God's hands and feet in the world. The Alpha and the Omega.

Jesus leaves, but we stay. As it turns out, this is the ultimate "left behind" story, but according to Jesus, being left behind is neither a sign of imperfect faith nor a chance to prove your self worth. Rather, being left behind is an honor, an invitation to participate in the glory of the Father, a commissioning, in fact, into the work of the Son. Eternal life, glory, and relationship with God -- in today's Gospel from John these aren't things waiting out there somewhere but instead are all around

us. Where do we see them? In doing what Jesus does. Healing, feeding, caring, listening, sharing, making manifest the grace and mercy of the God "who so loved the world."

Clearly this links up with a lot of the tasks often associated with the church -- caring for the poor, feeding the hungry, and so forth. And that is worth celebrating. But so are all of the ordinary tasks of everyday life -- work, play, family life, civic involvement, volunteer opportunities -- all of these ordinary and mundane things are also work that honors the Father. Any honest work can, indeed, help care for this world and the people God loves so much, and that is also how we participate in the glory Jesus talks about.

We've had a lot of endings here in the last few months. Too many deaths in our family, far too close together. We are still learning to cope with those endings. And there will be other kinds of endings to come: people moving away, students graduating, changing schools, changing jobs.

But there will be new beginnings as well. Next week at 8:00 we will baptize Grace Inge as a new member of the household of God. There are more babies on their way. Other new people will join this place. New seasons will come in their time.

Joining together to care for and love each other, and to care for and love the world around us is the work that God asks of us. Let us begin again, doing what it takes to bring in the kingdom.