

Ascension Sunday, 21 May 2023  
Saint Aidan's Episcopal Church, Portland OR  
The Rev'd Canon Raggs Ragan, Interim Rector

Alleluia! Christ is ascended to the throne of Glory. Alleluia. Amen

It is the Sunday after the Ascension and here we are in another waiting period. After forty days of reveling in experiences of barbecues at the seaside and appearances in locked rooms and awe at the miracle of Jesus conquest of death, we find Jesus was with the inner circle again, out on a hillside. First he again disabuses them of the idea that he has come to overthrow the Roman occupation and reestablish Israel's imperial greatness. He reminds them of the promise that God's Spirit will come upon them so that they can continue his work, not a work of political or military domination, but of witnessing to Christ to the ends of the earth.

And then he disappears. He is no longer with them on Mount Olivet and they know that he will not again suddenly show up at a lakeside fish cookout. How and when God's Spirit will come upon them is left totally open.

So it is a time of waiting. They had no way of knowing how long. At first they just stood there looking up, the way we sometimes stand watching a plane take off or a car disappear into the distance. And they appear stuck, so that we have those angels again, tapping them on the shoulder and asking what they are looking for; why are they staring at the empty place. On Easter it was the empty tomb; now it is an empty hillside and the sky – spaces where Christ was but no longer is. The job of the angels in both cases is to wake them up, to remind them that Christ will be there for them, but is not coming back as he was and where he was. That time is over; a new time has begun.

So, the disciples do a very sensible thing. They gather all their number together, back in Jerusalem, the women and the men, his followers and family, and devote themselves to prayer. They do not know what will come next, but they trust that it will be revealed; they trust that they will be given what they need to follow the Way that Jesus laid before them. And so they open their hearts to God in prayer.

I have always taken delight in imagining medieval celebrations of Ascension. Drama was at the heart of liturgy, helping people to truly enter into the stories. Many churches had what was called a 'Holy Ghost Hole' in the ceiling above the crossing, which was useful for a variety of these dramas.

On Ascension Day, a statue of Christ would be placed at the crossing, one with a convenient ring on the head so that a rope could go from there up through the hole in the ceiling where a monk or acolyte held the end ready to raise him up. As Acts was read, various priests and deacons and monks would be dressed up as the various followers including Jesus' mother Mary and Mary Magdalen and Joana – and Thomas, James and John, all gathered around the statue watching it slowly creak up into the hole in the ceiling, and then stuck there staring up, not knowing what to do next – when two more come in dressed as angels – to send them off to pray and wait for the Spirit to come upon them.

Interim periods between rectors are a time like that – a time of waiting and wondering exactly what will come next. Like the apostles we know that what is next will not be what was before. It will be a new reality, a new way to be together, a new way to be God's people in this particular time and place. And like the apostles we do not know how long our time of waiting and watching will be. That not knowing is for many of us the hardest part. The Ascension narrative shows us that the best way to prepare is to gather together to remember, to think, to talk, to pray. The gifts of God in the form of things like guidance and strength and insight will come, but we are most likely to recognize them if we are doing the work of prayer and thinking together.

Many of our number are off on retreat this weekend, exploring their spiritual lives and looking to the future of love and service in this community. The Profile Committee has been hard at work creating a document that will help the right person find the path to Saint Aidans. The Vestry is diligently working to keep everything moving forward, to foster relationships with the other faith groups in our Beloved Community.

Whatever part anyone is taking, we are all invited into diligent prayer, and into a life centered in hope.

This week one of Emily Dickinson's poems kept running through my mind. It begins:

'Hope' is the thing with feathers –  
That perches in the soul –  
And sings the tune without the words –  
And never stops – at all –

I love that image of the little bird in our souls keeping us warm, keeping us safe, keeping us comforted in the hardest times. Think again of that confusing time we remember today. The disciples have been on a bit of a seesaw with the Lord. Up and down and up and down, in ever more dramatic ways. They went up to Jerusalem in triumph and then down into the grave-filled gloom of the Kidron Valley. Then Jesus was up on the Cross. Then down into his own grave. Then up with Resurrection life. Forty days he has been with them in his risen form, teaching, eating, talking. Now it's time for another change. But this is not another down. Christ is off the seesaw, going further up, up out of their plane of experience. Up and away.

The disciples ask Jesus, "What now?" They remember all that they have heard about the Messiah, the Christ, coming to restore the fortunes of Zion. But Jesus tells them to forget about that. Whatever is happening with earthly kingdoms is in God's hands. That is not what we are about. "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Letting go of Christ has to have been very hard. The disciples were overwhelmed with grief when Jesus was killed. And then before they had time to come to terms with his absence from their lives, he was back in his risen form. After forty days, they were thoroughly used to his risen presence, used to his sharing breakfast and walking along the roads with them, fishing and talking. Now he was leaving a second time, in a new and different way. How hard that must have been! At first they just stood there, stupefied, staring at the emptiness where he no longer was.

It was remarkable enough that their teacher and friend had risen from the dead. Now he is returning to his previous divine existence, carrying our full humanity with him. Something very challenging to get our minds around even now two millennia later!

So they went back to Jerusalem and spent their time in common prayer. God has taken Jesus away and God is going to do something else that will be very important, but which they cannot quite envision, and which they must wait for – so prayer seems the logical course. And throughout all this, the thing with feathers, the bird of hope, is with them, drawing them forward, giving them the courage to wait in expectation.

In the Resurrection, they had experienced Jesus' triumph over death and all that it means of separation. Jesus battled death and won. He came back, reestablishing all of those relationships which seemed to be ended with his final breath. And that triumph over death meant that greater things were possible, that such a reuniting could happen for all of us.

Now Jesus was returning "to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." This took a lot of thinking and praying about. Jesus had returned to their fellowship and brought them reassurance, and then he returned to the relationship that he had before any of them ever knew him. I imagine the little bird, the thing with feathers, did a lot of fluttering as his friends tried to come to terms with that idea.

It was a return and yet it also was something entirely new. All that it means to be human, to be born, to live, to die, to experience pain and loss, and joy and friendship, is now part of who Jesus Christ, God the Son, now is. All that we are has been embraced in the heart of God. We have been mulling that over for two thousand years!

His followers knew that Jesus had been doing God's work in the world. So they waited and prayed and thought and wondered. But they did not wait in fear. Jesus left them 'the thing with feathers', left them hope that grew out of their experiences with him both before and after the Resurrection– so that even when he went away in a most puzzling way, the hope remained.

So here we are in the waiting time. We know that the disciples' waiting ends next Sunday on Pentecost. But they did not. They knew that it would end when God acted – and that when God acted they would know what to do.

'Hope' is the thing with feathers –  
That perches in the soul –  
And sings the tune without the words –  
And never stops – at all –

And so we all wait in hope for the work God will give us as unique individuals, us as the community of Saint Aidan's in 2023. We wait in hope and in confidence that as the Spirit did indeed come upon the waiting disciples, God will give us whatever strength and power and vision we need to do God's work in the world.  
Amen.