

Rose, Risen, Rising  
Preacher: Rev. Karen E. Gale  
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Acts 1:1-11

Where is Jesus?

Do we think of Jesus up in heaven looking down on us as we go about our daily lives?  
Do we think of Jesus sitting next to God judging the long lines of recently departed as they arrive to be sorted in the afterlife?

Is Jesus just a blip, a man who lived and died and was gone, a mere human moment in the vast span of time?

Is Jesus here as we gather in worship?

Is Jesus out on the street, seen in the least of these, the poor, the addicted, the lonely and depressed?

Where is Jesus?

Today is Ascension Sunday in the Christian calendar--Ascension Day itself being May 11 or 40 days after Jesus resurrection. (There is that mystical number 40 again.)

In today's scripture we read that Jesus is talking with his disciples. He is saying goodbye; he gives them the gift of wisdom and understanding of the scriptures. And then he goes away up into the sky--rising or ascending--until he is gone from sight.

Wow. Can you imagine being there? What it must have looked like. I particularly like the African themed artistic depiction of the event seen on the front of today's bulletin.

But what does it mean? Why did Jesus get sucked up into the air like that? And where did he go? Those of us with the benefit of 2000 years of science since the event wonder: did he dissipate in the atmosphere, did he head out into space? What?

Where is Jesus?

We could wrestle on and on and on about this.

But then, my favorite part, two men in white robes show up and say, "hey you guys, what are you looking up in the sky for? What are you doing standing here with sore necks? (as one translation read.) What are you waiting for? Jesus said to go to Jerusalem? So why aren't you going? What are you looking for?"

Well, they were looking for Jesus, right? Did they think he would float back down? Or reappear, or what? Or were they having a hard time saying goodbye? It felt like such a definitive ending.

And it was in a sense. Which is why Luke, the author of both Luke and the book Acts in our Bible, put the account of the ascension in two places, once at the conclusion of Luke, and then again at the beginning of Acts, the book we read from today.

Because the ascension of Jesus is not just an ending, but it is also a beginning.

Today we celebrate Mother's Day. The first Mother's Day was initiated by Anna Jarvis to honor her mother Ann Jarvis who had been a peace activist who cared for wounded soldiers on both sides of the American Civil War, and created Mother's Day Work Clubs to address public health issues.

Anna Jarvis wanted to honor her mother by continuing the work she started and so, starting on the day she held her mother's funeral, Anna chose to honor the work done in alleviating suffering and serving those in need by creating Mother's Day. We see that reflected in the Mother's Day march in Boston today that raises money for anti-violence initiatives. Anna took an ending, her mother's death, and created a beginning.

The disciples eventually do head to Jerusalem. They do gather with others for the feast of Pentecost and in the midst of that gathering, the Holy Spirit comes to them, lights their hearts and minds on fire, and the story of Jesus is shared. It is then carried back to lands all over the place by these faithful folks who had come to the temple for the Jewish holy day.

That's what happens next week. The birthday of the church. The beginning. Pentecost.

The disciples this week stand on a pivot point as they watch Jesus go. The end of Jesus with them personally. And the beginning of Jesus with us, all of us, all the way down to those of us sitting here this morning.

This actually is not so strange to us, particularly at this time of year. For, is graduation an ending or a beginning? Yes.

Or in other stages of our lives. Is marriage an ending or a beginning? Is divorce for that matter an ending or a beginning? Is becoming a parent an ending or a beginning? Yes.

Or in terms of our faith: Is death an ending or a beginning? Yes.

So as we stand with the disciples today looking up into the sky what does this "ending-slash-beginning" mean for us?

1. If you wait for your help to come from the sky in some disengaged supernatural way, you might be in for a long, long wait. Jesus isn't there. Jesus is here in the lives of the living, in the midst of the mess of being a human as best we are able. Jesus calls to us from the corners and the outsiders. Not from the pearly clouds above.  
So, quit looking up and start looking in--into the hearts and hurts of those around you.

2. Jesus goes on ahead of us. We talked about this back at Easter time. That in the gospel of Mark, we don't get to see Jesus but the strangers in white (hmmmm, there they are again--they really get around). Anyway, the strangers in white say the Jesus has gone on ahead of you. He will meet you there.

Today again the strangers tell us that Jesus goes on ahead. Go to Jerusalem. Go to the places that you fear to tread. Go where the people are. Go and Jesus will be there.

Jesus goes on ahead of us, even when we don't see him. There is no where we can go, no experience of fear and doubt and loss that Jesus is not present. Jesus goes on ahead of us. And we can follow knowing we are not alone.

3. Jesus is no longer on earth. So someone has to step up and do that work. And that someone is you and me. Us.

The sixteenth century mystic Spanish nun Teresa of Avila put it perfectly in her reflection:

Christ has no body but yours,

No hands, no feet on earth but yours,

Yours are the eyes with which he looks  
Compassion on this world,  
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,  
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.  
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,  
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.  
Christ has no body now but yours.

Yes. We are it. So as we head into these places where Jesus leads us. As we go looking for him in the least and the lonely. We are it. We are the ones bringing the message of love and hope and healing. Us. You and me. No matter how unprepared we feel. But we are never alone (see point number 2).

4. The ascension is an especially good thing to remember during the Interim Time. As we work toward having a settled pastor here at Pilgrim, it can be tempting to wait for the new pastor to get here to solve all the challenges we face as a faith community.

A new pastor will increase membership...  
A new pastor will create new enthusiasm for leadership...  
A new pastor will renew our youth group...  
A new pastor will restore our mission trips...

And on and on...

It can be tempting to look up into the sky. Or just check out a bit until the new person shows up.

But that ignores the reality that the work to be done is to be done by all of us. A pastor comes to work with you. A pastor comes as a partner not a savior. A pastor will come and walk the road alongside you. A pastor won't descend from the sky. Because expecting that will lead to certain disappointment and disillusionment on both parts.

There is a story about a new pastor who was called to a church.  
The new pastor was invited on a fishing trip with three members of the congregation. Once they pattered out into the middle of the lake one of the members said, "oh shoot, I forgot my tackle box on the shore."

The new pastor said, "it's ok, I'll get it," and proceeded to step over the side of the boat and walk on top the water to the shore to get the box.

The three members watched and one said sadly to the other, "well, that's a darn shame. We got ourselves a new pastor that can't swim."

A new pastor will arrive here to do the work of serving others, offering hospitality, including the forgotten in partnership with you. Not for you. Not instead of you. Not as directed by you.

With you.

Together you will seek to follow the direction of Jesus, the one who goes ahead of all of us calling us into ministry. That we might be Jesus' hands, feet, voice, heart on this earth. Amen.