

“Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?”

Ascension Day is one the great celebrations of the church and follows forty days after Easter and just before Pentecost. In the creeds we say Jesus “ascended into heaven” and likely don’t reflect often about what it means for us in our faith. On Sunday we hear the story of the ascension in the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, written by the same author. Although the stories vary, the Risen Jesus has appeared to “many” and now the followers of Jesus gather, and Jesus promises the Holy Spirit. Then the story makes a twist, and Jesus blesses the people and goes up into the sky and disappears. In the creed we say “sits on the right hand of God” the preferred place, but what place? At the time of Jesus a three tiered universe of heaven earth and Hades was possible, but a Dante universe for us as people who have seen beyond the moon and looked at pictures of stars being born—there is no “place” in the way the disciples would have imagined Elijah or Jesus being carried up into heaven. So, we need to reimagine the meaning of a theological concept in our own day. They are not answers, but wonderings.

What does it mean that the Risen One, who broke bread with his friends, ate meals with his followers, walked into locked rooms, and suddenly appeared and disappeared with the wounds of his crucifixion still on his body? We don’t know. Or I don’t know. Somehow Jesus is a corporal being, not the infant in Mary’s arms, or the man who grieved at the death of his friend but a New Creation. Thinking about energy and particles and Light and Love I can wonder what it means that death is transformed in resurrection, but that too is a mystery. I can know in my being that there is something in this New Life that can embrace laughter and joy and sorrow, not in the abstract, but in the power of a new life in all of creation. The mystery of the ascension moves us from this place of wonder to Jesus’ promise that when he leaves his friends and followers, they are promised the Holy Spirit who will be with them in a way Jesus cannot be with them. The Holy Spirit of Pentecost is coming.

As the disciples are speaking with Jesus, Jesus blesses them and rises up, (moving toward God?) and I would imagine that some of Jesus’ followers worshipped him, while others felt abandoned again. Did some still also trust in Jesus’ promise of the Advocate? To trust Jesus that the Holy Spirit who would walk along them would speak to the longing in their heart is faith. For today, I would suggest we reflect on the moment that Jesus blesses the people gathered, and then says wait. Waiting is hard; waiting is also necessary as witnesses of God’s great Love for us. Waiting holds the expectation of transformation but is not transformation itself. Perhaps it is the Light, but not the source of the Light.



While waiting is hard, thinking we have missed a moment, is even harder. It will be a different moment, but we have not missed out; God promises to come. Jesus’ promise that the disciples will be witness into all the world is also God’s promise to us now. The Holy Spirit is coming and in the understanding of the Gospel is already and not yet. Yes, we are waiting, and yes, we are being sent out to heal, to teach and to love all of God’s people with the gifts we are given as a community of the faithful. Angels come to remind us, “Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” The Spirit is coming and is here.