

05.16.10 Ascension Sunday

Sermon: "Directions"

w/ Joseph McBrayer

I really like "*people watching*." I find it more than amusing and educational in that it helps me to better understand people. Public spaces and places provide an atmosphere for learning and understanding more about people and relationships. A university campus is an excellent venue for this sociological past time and what I learn here gives me insights into my work and ministry with students and young adults. This past Monday offered a veritable "festival" of sorts--Emory University's Commencement for the Graduating Class of 2010. I was able to witness students graduate and receive honors for their studies (**5 of whom were** active participants in the life and ministry of the Emory Wesley Fellowship here at Glenn--4 graduating with Honors and one Bobby Jones Scholar to comment briefly on their time here at Emory). It was a good occasion to see the support and love of students' parents and friends at the end of their time here at Emory.

It was a good time to say farewell to those students I've had the pleasure of knowing and working with for the past 3 years. During the commencement speeches and addresses I noticed a poignant message on a graduate's cap. Against the black polyester square in yellow letters it said: "The End." I'm not sure if the cap's owner meant "the end of school," the "end of her undergraduate experience" or if she was simply the last person in the alphabetically arranged line of graduates. Either way, I'd like to think it was not only a day of endings, but a "day of new beginnings"--a day of celebrating the past and present--a day to transition and look ahead towards the continuing adventure of life.

Now, as far as the church calendar is concerned, this is *the end* of the Easter season in the liturgical life of the church--Easter the time where we celebrate resurrection of the One who came and dwelt among us--full of grace and truth--our Savior, Jesus the Christ.

This Sunday is a day of transition--today we mark *the end* of Eastertide and appropriately we read *the end* of the Gospel of Luke. Today we celebrate the Ascension of Jesus. Ascension Day has a long history in church tradition and, although Ascension Day is celebrated on the 40th Day after Easter--*this past thursday*--we, and many other churches around the globe are celebrating Jesus' ascending to heaven today as Ascension Sunday.

A quick historical tidbit to share part of the importance of Ascension day in the Anglican/ Methodist tradition: John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was rather fond of revising and reforming Anglican tradition. In his 1784 edition of *the Prayer Book for Methodists in America*, which was a revision of the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, he retained only three special non-sunday services: Christmas, Good Friday, AND *Ascension Sunday*.

So in some ways Ascension Sunday is an ending. However, I think that there is more going on here than just the end of Jesus' *earthly, physical* ministry with the disciples. The Ascension of Jesus at the end of Luke's gospel is a transformative experience that leaves the disciples to carry on the ministry and mission of Christ.

Today, as we remember Christ's Ascension, we are going to look at and celebrate two of the main aspects of this day: what I have termed "*The Directional and the Doctrinal*."

"Directional." "Direction." Ah, "*Directions*." Also known as a thing that many of us here are accused and often guilty of neither asking for nor following. (pause and laugh here) As some of you know, I'm very interested in Words, definitions, and meanings. So, the word "**directions**" can have many meanings--*a course along which someone or something moves, a general way in which something or someone develops, a set of instructions for how to get somewhere or for putting something together; the cardinal directions of North, South, East, and West; up, down, left right, etc.*

In preparing for today I found myself particularly drawn to the **directions** and the **directional language** that Jesus speaks, takes, and makes in the Luke text: *Jesus said to them...to rise from the dead...beginning in jerusalem...I am sending upon you... led them out as far as bethany and lifting up his hands...carried up into heaven...returned to Jerusalem*. For me, these new found **directions** offer a filter and a lens to see what God might be saying to us today through this Word.

Let's investigate some of the **directions** and **directional language** here to see what jumps out at us.

Jesus said to them: Speech, conversation, and language in general is a directional thing--in conversation between two or more people there is an exchange of information, ideas, values, and from this mutual exchange can come new meaning, conclusions, and actions. This was certainly true for the disciples and we can see in this passage that

their minds were “opened to understand the Scriptures” through Jesus’ actions and teachings. This is Good News to us too--we are not alone in our seeking understanding--as Jesus then opened the Scriptures to the disciples we will have the Holy Spirit to come, to guide, to teach and admonish us in the ways of living a full life both here and in the life to come.

And now another direction: to rise from the dead: We tend to think of life as a directional event--from birth to death, cradle to the grave--our life is a journey. Here we are reminded of God’s saving and miraculous deed in Jesus’ rising from the dead--breaking the cycle and power of sin and death by conquering and usurping death itself by rising on the third day.

Moving along, we find another: beginning in jerusalem: The often said adage of knowing where you’re heading by remembering where you started is true--not in an overly sentimental way but in a way that orients our lives and gives them fuller meaning and direction. For the disciples, they are to go and, beginning in Jerusalem, proclaim in his name “repentance and forgiveness of sins” to all the nations and to do what Christ has been doing.

Repentance here is a very directional concept as it means that we literally turn away from sin and sinful ways. And, the “forgiveness of sins” is a pardoning from sin. Later in this service, we’ll join in singing *Love Divine, All Loves Excelling*, asking God to take away our “bent toward sinning”--that is our natural inclination toward ways other than God’s ways. This is the message Jesus gave to the disciples to go and proclaim in His Name. The author of Luke continues telling this part of the story in the story of those who are sent--the Book of the Acts of the Apostles.

Speaking of Sending, I am sending upon you: Now, in this directional admonition Jesus tells the disciples to stay in Jerusalem--literally “sit still”--and wait upon the promised Holy Spirit. This is **Pentecost**--which is this coming Sunday in the liturgical church year. Being clothed with “power from on high” is a key line here--the word for power, *dunamis*, is where we get the word **dynamite** from--a force, energy, ability, or source of being. It is this power of God which is at work in and through the church still to this day.

And still more direction in this story: Jesus led them out as far as bethany: In this directional portion of this passage Jesus has travelled on foot with the disciples a short 2 miles outside the Jerusalem to Bethany, at the base of the Mount of Olives. He has

led them **OUT** from where they have been hiding in the darkness of the locked doors and windows of the upper room and **into** the light of day: the knowledge and understanding of the Scriptures in light of Jesus the Christ.

The Good News is that Christ is still leading many of us out of the darkness of our own fear and misunderstandings. Once they arrived in Bethany, Jesus lifted up his hands and blessed the disciples. This action parallels Aaron's blessing of the Israelites in Leviticus and this blessing and the position of hands raised is still a part of our church tradition ancient and modern. (*raise hands in the orans position*)

While he blessed them, he was carried up into heaven. Now, this brings us to an important intersection with the second part of the Ascension for us today--first was the **directional** and now the "**Doctrinal**."

The Ascension of Christ has a strong teaching moment in it, a **Doctrinal** element to it: Christ's ascending is important, but the place to which Christ ascends is vitally important--it is a place of power--as we say, *and will say later on in this service*, in the Apostle's Creed "*the third day he rose from the dead; **he ascended into heaven**, and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the living and the dead.*" This is indeed a place of power.

The language for this part of the Creed can be found earlier in Luke 22:69--when Jesus is being tried before the Elders and Priests: "The son of man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God." Jesus' ascending here is important for our seeking to understand more about God's nature--not in a modal or classification and separation kind of way, but a way that helps us to relate to God and for God to relate to us: In essence, this relationship of us to God and God to us, **is** the worship of God. For a lack of better terms, Jesus' being ascended is not necessarily a historical proposition of inter-planetary travel from this sphere to the heavenly realm--it is not necessarily about the physical location and spatial accuracy--**but**, it **is** about the **tangible reality** of the **power** of Christ's rule and reign both in Heaven and on Earth. It is this kind of power which is at work in our very lives and in the Kingdom of God. When we encounter this power--God's Spirit--we know it and we are called to respond. (pause here)

We respond, we respond when we remember the things that God has done through the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus the Christ, who foretold and promised the coming of the Power From on High; the Spirit of God who will comfort, convict, heal, lead, and guide us, the Holy Spirit.

The Disciples, after witnessing Jesus being carried up into heaven (as were the greatest Hebrew prophets--Elijah, Moses, Enoch, & Ezra)--they responded--they responded by worshiping Christ--but they didn't stop there. They then followed the **directions** Jesus had given them. That is the **directions** and the **doctrines**--that is the instructions and the teachings of Jesus. They **returned to Jerusalem** and "were continually in the temple blessing God" as they waited in the city for God's Power--the Holy Spirit.

And we know where the story goes from there--
it is the story of the church in the world.

It is the work and ministry of we who follow Christ even today.
It is the story of God's power at work in our lives.

Thanks be to God.

In the name of the Father,
the Son,
and the Holy Spirit,
One God, now and forever. Amen.

So, as the disciples responded to *the Word of the Lord* on that day, let us continue now in worship as we stand and respond in singing of the story of Easter--the the resurrection and exaltation of our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ--Hymn number 307: "Christ is Risen."