

May 28, 2017 • Ascension Sunday • Memorial Day Sunday



The Past Guides Us— The Future Needs Us

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

Luke 24:44-53

Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

I wonder if any one recognized today's Psalm as last Sunday's Psalm? Did it sound familiar? Maybe if we hear it again in the manner we did it last week: (CLAP, CLAP)

God has gone up with a shout, (CLAP, CLAP)

The LORD with the sound of a trumpet. (CLAP, CLAP)

Sing praises to God, sing praises; (CLAP, CLAP)

Sing praises to our God, sing praises. (CLAP, CLAP)

This is the appointed Psalm for this Ascension Day. God has gone up with a shout! . (CLAP, CLAP)

As Christians, we acclaim Christ Jesus who, Scripture tells us, on this day has himself gone up with a shout. In traditional church language, we say that Christ ascends to be seated at the right hand of God.

On this last Sunday of the Easter season, with Christians all over the world we celebrate the Ascension, one of the earliest celebrations of the church since at least the fourth century, is the celebration of the power and authority of the Risen Christ, his nearness to God, and the affirmation that in Christ, everything human is forever near to the heart of God.

This year, Ascension Sunday falls on Memorial Day weekend, this holiday of remembering. We pause to remember our veterans and express our gratitude for those who have given their lives in the service of our nation. We remember and we give thanks, for everything human is forever near to the heart of God.

Originally, Memorial Day was celebrated on two different days in two different months. It began during or just after the Civil War as it was called in the North, the War Between the States as it was called in the South. Memorial Day, or Decoration Day, as it was first called, started in the north at the order of General John Alexander Logan. In the South, it was apparently started by church ladies who needed no official order to simply begin decorating the graves of their fallen soldiers. After some years of this, as the wounds of that war began to heal, the days were merged into one and Memorial Day became a day of reconciliation as well as a day of remembering, a day to look forward as well as to look back.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem, "Decoration Day," written in 1892, describes well this decorating of gravestones as a way to pay homage to those who had died:

Sleep, comrades, sleep and rest
On this Field of the Grounded Arms,
Where foes no more molest,
Nor sentry's shot alarms!
All is repose and peace,
Untrampled lies the sod;
The shouts of battle cease,
It is the Truce of God!
Rest, comrades, rest and sleep!
The thoughts of men shall be
As sentinels to keep
Your rest from danger free.
Your silent tents of green
We deck with fragrant flowers;
Yours has the suffering been,
The memory shall be ours.

"Yours has the suffering been, the memory shall be ours." The memory shall be ours. Memorial Day is to be a time of remembering, lest we never forget or take for granted all that has been given and sacrificed to bring us to this day. And still, the Ascension calls us forward, with Christ, into God's unfolding future. The purpose of memory is to open us to life fully lived in the present moment and point us to a future with hope. This tug and pull of memory and future is a gift to us, a spiritual gift to us, on this weekend in late May. When so much is stressing us out and pulling us in a million directions, in our personal lives, our family lives, so much stressing us out as a nation and on the world stage as well, the grounding of memory and the promise of God's future can help reset our moral and spiritual compass, settle us down, give us pause, and point us in the right direction going forward.

This past week, we were again shocked and horrified. The deaths of two in Portland, a young man and an army veteran, who gave their lives defending young women, one Muslim being harassed on a light rail train. The murder of Coptic Christians in Egypt. A bomb taking many lives and injuring many more in Manchester, England, made more heart-breaking by the fact that it occurred at a performance by Ariana Grande, a pop star whose audience was made up of kids and teens.

The Methodist Church in Britain issued a number of statements and shared prayers this past week in the aftermath. One of the most moving, given the age of the victims, comes from the Youth President of the Methodist Church in Britain. Tim Annan shared, in part: "It's hard to look at the images and stories coming out of Manchester today and not feel rage at this horrific act of violence against people; all of whom were just going to live life to its fullest..."

"Yet, in the face of the anger, confusion and grief, the response of the people of Manchester was love and compassion. From the emergency services responding quickly and effectively, to the many people who opened up their homes to those who needed a place to stay, to cab drivers transporting distraught people for free to a place to rest. Even at the darkest moment, humanity, compassion and hope shone through. Beautiful and terrible things will happen, but don't give in to anger or fear. Know that you are surrounded by God's love."

Other church leaders said: "In a diverse city one thing we can be sure of is that people in Manchester will not let this event divide us. Manchester is the home of a movement called We Stand Together...in which people of many different faiths and backgrounds recognise that we find strength in our common humanity." "Our faith teaches us that even the worst of evils can never defeat love, so we pray that the people of Manchester, of all faiths and none, will discover a renewed unity as they respond to this atrocity with compassion, dignity and hope."

Did you hear it in their words? Both the remembering and the resolve to be part of creating a new future with hope.

As Jesus ascends to heaven, he sends his disciples back out into the world. The ministry and mission of the church begin here. The disciples now are to proclaim to the world the story of God's faithfulness, justice, and mercy as had been revealed in the life and teaching, the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus. Jesus ascends to God so that this urgent work of the church may begin.

What message does he leave them with? Use the gifts I've given you. Claim your baptism. Preach the word I've shared with you. Teach the things I've shown to you. Claim the vision I've implanted in your heart. He's empowering disciples to change the world right where we already are, using the tools and gifts he's already given us.

He's given us a vision of his kingdom, hasn't he, a kingdom where heaven and earth are one, on earth as in heaven as he said? A kingdom of love and compassion. A kingdom of righteousness and peace. A kingdom where the last will be first and the first will be last. A kingdom where no one is excluded or unloved. A kingdom where no one is hungry or afraid. A kingdom where tears are wiped dry. A kingdom where laughter replaces grieving and the tomb is always empty. A kingdom where the powers of darkness hold no power. A kingdom where the poor hear Good news and the eyes of the blind are opened. A kingdom where swords are beat into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks and where the night becomes as day.

Live out my kingdom within yourself and among yourselves. And in this way, the world will see and believe. Because of you, how you live, the world will see hope, will see my plan for loving everyone, will see a compelling way of life. In you, the world will see my good, good news.

There's an old legend about the return of the Lord Jesus Christ to heaven after his Ascension. It is said that angel Gabriel meets him at the pearly gates and they have the following exchange:

"Lord, this is a great salvation that thou hast wrought," said the angel. But the Lord Jesus only said: "Yes."

Gabriel presses him. "What plans hast thou made for carrying on the work? How are all to know what thou hast done?" asked Gabriel.

"I left Peter and James and John and Martha and Mary to tell their friends, their friends to tell their friends, 'til all the world should know."

"But, Lord Jesus," said Gabriel, "suppose Peter is too busy with the nets, or Martha with the housework, or the friends they tell are too occupied, and forget to tell their friends—what then?"

"The Lord Jesus did not answer at once. Then he said in his quiet wonderful voice: "I have not made any other plans. I am counting on them."

Counting on us. In the words of essayist Rebecca Solnit: "the past guides us; the future needs us."

On this Memorial/Ascension Sunday, may we set aside some moments to receive the gift of this day: the grounding of memory and the promise of God's future, a future with hope. And may Christ again bless us with the peace and the power to take our place in the sacred work of creating a future with hope.

Notes:

Feasting on the Word Year A, Vol. 2. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

The Methodist Church in Britain, 23 May 2017.

Resources for Preaching and Worship Year C, compiled by Hannah Ward and Jennifer Wild. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003.

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