“Living the Way of Love: Love Turns the World Upside Down”
Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

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.

On this last Sunday of the Eastertide season, with Christians all over the world we celebrate the Ascension, the celebration of the power and authority of the Risen Christ, of his nearness to God, and of the affirmation that in Christ, everything human is forever near to the heart of God.

In traditional church language, we say that Christ ascends to be seated at the right hand of God. One contemporary preacher has called the Ascension the exclamation point on the Resurrection! As if the early church wanted to shout: “he really, really rose!” Really and truly. How high? As high as the very throne of God.

But we can also see Christ’s Ascension as the flip side of the incarnation, God coming to earth to take on human form in Jesus. With Christ’s ascent into heaven, the church is saying that the circle is whole, that God in Christ is always close to us on earth and that we, through Christ, are always close to the heart of God. And that heaven is as near as the heartbeat of God beating within.

The Ascension is described, in slightly different versions, in the Gospel according to Luke, the story of the life of Jesus, and also in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, the story of the beginnings of the life of the church.

The story of the Ascension, you see, is told both at the end of the story of Jesus’ life and at the beginning of the story of the church. It is the hinge between the two. It marks the moment when we shift from Jesus’ time into our own, from Jesus’ story to our own story. In order for Jesus to be the Christ, to be both fully human and fully divine, he must be lifted up and seated now and for all time at the right hand of God. And simultaneously, for the church to take authority, for the church to be empowered, it must let him go and take his power into itself.

We might just pause here for a moment as the story unfolds. Might we not wonder what Jesus might have been feeling or thinking or hoping at that moment? Was he ready to go? How confident was he about leaving the mission of God in the hands of, well, of the likes of us?

Our own Chancel Choir member, poet and composer, Michael McClish, wrote a beautiful anthem text during this time of COVID. I can’t wait for the day when we will hear it sung. Here are the words Michael wrote, imagining how Jesus might have felt in this moment of the transfer of power, an ending and a new beginning:
If I Would Leave You in Peace, An Ascension Poem

If I would leave you,
If it were my last breath,
If I had no more gifts within,
If my hands could no longer touch,
If they could no longer feel,
No longer comfort,
No longer heal,
I would consider my time here well spent.

I would let my words be torn
Like tapestries ripped from the walls.
I would let my life be silenced

Could I look in your eyes and know for sure you understood? How much do we feel we understand of his message, of all that he’s now entrusting to us?

Everything about Jesus’ life and ministry has shown us the importance of life itself. He’s shown us what it means to stoop low and step aside for the sake of another. He’s shown us what it means to reach out and draw the outcast near. What it means to be willing to give oneself away for the well-being of the other.

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.

Stay where you are, he says, and 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.

As Jesus ascends, he tells us disciples to stay where we are. It begins to becomes clear that the Body of Christ, now on earth, is no longer Jesus, but the church. And he says: you will be clothed in power. You will be clothed in power. Jesus blesses his disciples, the church, with power to live, to witness, to have faith. You will be clothed with power, he promises.

Stay. Right here, in your life as you know it. Stay. Love. Be love. Serve one another. Aspire to be the best mother, father, daughter, son, lawyer, teacher, banker, singer, preacher, engineer, student, teacher, friend, neighbor, grandparent, citizen, disciple…you can possibly be. And in all things, love me, Christ says. And love one another as I have loved you.

It’s deceptively simple, that mission statement. For once we start living into what he’s asking us to do, we see that there’s more to it than we might first think. Much more. Because he’s really saying: use the gifts I’ve given you.

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Claim your baptism. Speak 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 really asking us to change the world right where we already are, using the tools and gifts he’s already given us, living the way of love.

Can Christ look into our eyes and know that we understand, that we’re beginning to understand, that we wholeheartedly want to understand?

There’s always more to learn and always room to grow deeper into the Way of Love. Christ is present here today to bless us and to commission us. Christ, who is eternally present with God, will send us power through the Holy Spirit, power to lift us up and set us down to live our life fully right where we are. Christ will give us power to stay put and to witness to the kingdom and to love very well, to fully live the Way of Love. In us, the world will see the great good news of Christ Jesus, our Savior and our Lord. Amen.

Notes: