

Planted by Streams of Water: A Sermon on Luke 24:44-53, Acts 1:1-11, and Psalm 1
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It's only fair to tell you upfront that the Ascension of Jesus has not traditionally fallen on my top ten list of favorite Bible stories. It isn't even among the top 100, and though I haven't counted to be sure, if you are a betting person, the odds are in your favor that it doesn't crack the top thousand. In the six years I've been here at PCCH, I've preached on the ascension multiple times, which leads me to believe that the story of Jesus' ascension into heaven following his post-resurrection appearances doesn't rank among Cindy's favorite biblical narratives, either.

And we are not alone. This day usually gets brushed over--even in the church--and I can understand why. It doesn't quite have the oomph of the empty tomb or the dramatic irony of Mary Magdalene's presuming the risen Christ to be the gardener. It doesn't have the fast pace of Peter and the beloved disciple's footrace to find that the stone had, indeed, been rolled away; nor does it engage the senses like the story of the risen Jesus eating fish on the seashore. There at least you can imagine the feeling of the sand and rocks beneath Jesus' feet, the warmth of the fire, the sound of the waves, the salt in the air and water that must have seasoned his breakfast. But the story of the ascension leaves us wanting for sensory details like these. If you listen to the story as it is told in the book of Acts, you'll come up with precious little to engage your senses of smell, taste, or touch; and, as we now know, these are the senses to which we more readily attach memory and meaning. So it's no wonder we rush right past the ascension on our way to Pentecost which we celebrate next week. In fact, I challenge you to try to engage your senses now as I read Acts, chapter 1, starting at verse 8. Listen for the word of God and for anything even remotely having to do with smell, taste, or touch:

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.' When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.'"

Now, you may be thinking that you can engage the sense of sight here, and sure, the vision of Jesus ascending on a cloud is pretty spectacular. Thing is, it's sort of *opposite* of the God-with-us, Word-made-flesh Jesus that we find so comforting. We've seen people eat fish. That picture of Jesus is endearing. Most of us would love nothing more than to have breakfast with Jesus "down the shore" and to sit and chat and watch the sunrise and linger over a meal, and more than that, to behold the risen Jesus, wounds and all, and appetite and all, right there across from us around the campfire. But the ascension, well, we're not really sure what to do with that. I've never seen anyone ascend into heaven on a cloud. It's hard to relate to that story. It's nothing at all like the compelling moment when the disciples finally recognize Jesus when he breaks bread after the long walk to Emmaus. We break bread, too. And we touch it and taste it and smell it. But the ascension story is so...ethereal...and cloud-y...and not at all like the story of Jesus' inviting Thomas to touch his wounds. Bottom line, the ascension seems to lack that gritty, tactile "down to earth" quality. But maybe that's because it isn't so down to earth.

The story simply does not match up with our reason or our lived human experience. It's as if Jesus' promise of the Holy Spirit is like a promise that the check is in the mail. So we brush this story aside, and truth be told, we are probably a little embarrassed by it. Jesus riding a cloud to heaven is just one more arrow in the quiver of a culture that thinks Christians are anti-reason or anti-science. In a world that increasingly finds Christianity irrelevant, we might prefer to play down the Ascension, if not publicly or collectively, then at least in our own lives of faith. We don't like stories to which we cannot relate. We don't want to focus on Jesus' departure flight. I don't like to preach on this story because even though I know it reflects an ancient cosmology that no longer jives with our scientific understanding of the world, and even though I know it's a metaphor, I spend the other fifty-one weeks of the year assuring you that Jesus is not distant—telling you over and over again in hospital hallways and church school classrooms that Jesus is with you in your struggles and right in front of you in the person God has placed on your daily path; Jesus is present in the people who love you and in the people you are called to love.

For some time now, I've imagined that the ascension story ran counter to this claim—that Jesus' ascension rendered him indeed, distant. No doubt the disciples thought this, too, caught, as they were, still gazing up to the heavens after Jesus had disappeared from their sight.

"Why do you stand looking up towards heaven?" the figures in white inquire. They might ask us the same thing. When life starts throwing us sucker punches, we look to heaven wondering where our God-with-us

Jesus has gone. The Jesus we thought we knew, well, we can't see him anymore, or touch him or hear him. And though he has promised us the gift of the Holy Spirit, that promise seems to have left the building, too.

Yet, in this very void, in this seeming absence of Jesus, my heart has been strangely warmed to the ascension story this week, first by carefully reading Jesus' words before his ascension side by side with Psalm 1, and second by a seven-minute phone call.

First things first: There are just two accounts of the Ascension, presumably written by the same author. An ascension story ends the gospel according to Luke and begins the book of Acts, which might be better named "Luke, volume 2." In the Lukan account, Jesus begins the narrative by reminding the disciples to look to what our Jewish brothers and sisters call the TaNaKh for a better understanding of Jesus' fulfillment of Holy Scripture. TaNaKh is an acronym for the Torah, the Nevi'im, and the Ketuvim: that is, the law of Moses, the prophets, and the writings (including but not limited to the Psalms) that make up the whole of Hebrew Scripture and the whole of what we as Christians call The Old Testament. In keeping with Jesus' instructions, then, it makes sense for us to take a closer look at a portion of our only Old Testament reading for today, Psalm 1: *"Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked,/or take the path that sinners tread,/or sit in the seat of scoffers;/but their delight is in the law of the Lord,/and on his law they meditate day and night./They are like trees/planted by streams of water,/which yield their fruit in its season,/and their leaves do not wither."*

So what are we to do with the cricks in our necks as we search the skies for a promised savior? Perhaps the first step is simply to look down to where our feet have been planted. In Psalm 1, the righteous person is compared to a tree *planted* by streams of water. Notice that it isn't a tree that simply grows beside the stream. It has been intentionally *planted* there, rooted to the spot that will continue to nourish its well-being. Even as Jesus is ascending to heaven, he is grounding the disciples in scripture, rooting them to the practices of prayer and worship, and promising them the life-giving stream of the Holy Spirit, a stream that will enable them to witness to what they have seen and heard not only in Jerusalem, but to the ends of the earth. Just as Jesus opened the disciples' minds to understand the scriptures, so reading the Psalm next to the ascension texts helped to reveal to me that Jesus wasn't abandoning the disciples, but rather rooting them in love for God and love for one another.

Once Psalm 1 had cracked open my previously hardened heart, I made a phone call to Kenneth Carder, a retired bishop of the United Methodist Church and Professor Emeritus at Duke Divinity School. I first met him several years ago through his daughters Sheri and Sandra, with whom I attended Bible study. Sheri suggested I read Bishop Carder's books and even gave me free copies. Sandra pointed me to a video recording of an address her father gave to a graduating class of Duke Divinity School. I still remember that address. In it Dr. Carder reminded the Duke Divinity graduates—most of whom would go on to become ministers, chaplains, non-profit managers, and theology professors—that it was their *baptism*, not their shiny new Master of Divinity degree, that symbolized God's claim on their lives. I listened to that address just before attending seminary, and it shaped my seminary experience in profound ways.

Having been so heavily influenced by Dr. Carder, I called him to ask his permission to share his story—his family's story—as an example of bearing fruit in the place where God has planted us. You see, although he has been an influential figure in my ministry all along, it is the work in which he currently engages that is most clearly teaching me what it means to be a pastor. These days, Dr. Carder serves as chaplain for the Bethany memory care unit of which his wife, Linda, is a resident. The unit is part of a senior care community where Dr. Carder leads weekly Bible study and a weekly worship service including communion. He does not sugarcoat his experience of caring for Linda who has advanced frontotemporal dementia, but most of his writing these days has to do with what he is learning by serving a population of around 40 residents, including his wife, who are unlikely to remember his name. He has glimpsed moments of recognition when residents who can barely string together words can say The Lord's Prayer or sing beloved hymns. He has come to know in a real and visceral way that though we may forget God, God never forgets us.¹

So I called Dr. Carder to ask his permission which he gladly gave, but more than that, in the span of a seven-minute phone call, he also gave me these words of grace: "Austin, the way I see the Ascension is this: It's not Jesus of Nazareth that I see in the residents at Bethany. It's the ascended Jesus, the Jesus that isn't limited by human constraints—of the mind, or the body, or anything. It's the Jesus who is free."

Perhaps the Jesus who is free is the only one who can free us. From now on, I love the Ascension. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

¹ Many of the details for the inclusion of this story originate from the following article written by Sam Hodges of the United Methodist News Service: <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/retired-bishop-serves-memory-care-unit-as-chaplain>