

THE CADANCE OF NEW LIFE; LUKE 24: 44-53; ASCENSION SUNDAY, MAY 24, 2020; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

If I say Dyngus Day how many of you know what I am talking about? Raise your hand! Full disclosure, I can never remember the meaning of that sacred Polish holiday. I know it has something to do with Easter but that's where my memory fades and mystery takes over. Ascension Day—which is always the *last Thursday* of Eastertide—but we celebrate it on the *last Sunday* of Eastertide—like Dyngus Day—is hidden behind the veil of “the almost-but-not-quite” familiar. But don't worry, by the end of the sermon you know everything you need to know about this strange, important Christian festival.

There are two ways to talk about the Ascension. The first is what it does.

Ascension Day solves the problem, as one commentator said bluntly, of what to do with the body of Jesus: it goes to heaven. Hence the phrase in the Apostle's Creed, “I believe in the resurrection *of the body.*” But solving that problem creates another problem; if Jesus is in heaven he is no longer with his disciples; thus, enter the Holy Spirit who Jesus said he would send after his departure.

While these three parts of the Trinitarian God taking their places in the theology of the early church may be obvious to us it was not so obvious to that first generation. There was no such thing as “the Trinity” as an official doctrine of the church until the Council of Nicea in 325.

But now that Jesus is at God's right hand, Jesus can reign with God and provide God with another persona. And when the Holy Spirit who Jesus promised would come in his absence makes its debut at Pentecost the whole superstructure of the Christian Godhead is now in place just fifty days after the resurrection. Here's what Paul says: If Jesus didn't ascend to be with God then Jesus wasn't God and if Jesus wasn't God then our teaching is in vain and we are the most to be pitied. But if Jesus did ascend then all the things we claim about the power of life and love conquering sin and death are true and we, who are victims of our own sinfulness, are given our lives back over and over.

The other way to talk about the Ascension is in terms of what it makes possible. Jesus' disciples, you and I receive new life that this risen, ascended-to-the-right-hand-of-God, second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ makes possible.

Luke's account of the Ascension describes Jesus 'going up' to the right hand of God. His account repeats what I am calling “the cadence of salvation” before he ends his gospel: “if you remember anything remember this” Luke implies. The “cadence of salvation” are the steps to new life: we are saved, sent, and blessed.

In today's lesson the disciples encounter the risen Christ; he shows them the wounds in his side, hands and feet, he asks for a fish which he eats before them. This Jesus is real, not a figment of their collective memory, or a ghost or their imagination.

Luke says Jesus opens their minds like he did with those two disciples on the road to Emmaus Easter day when they stopped to have dinner with Jesus; once again he explains biblical history and his place in it. He connects all the dots of God's plan to free the human family from sin and death culminating with his death and resurrection. Remember the disciples need all the help they can get!

Then Jesus tells them because they are witnesses to these things he will send them into the world to tell this story and bring salvation to others for which he gives them his blessing. Saved, sent, blessed. Then he ascends.

Now that Jesus is at the right hand of God we are to carry out his work in the world. If you have been saved by God's good news of new life through the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus, *if you are a witness in your own life* to Christ's saving power then you become one who is sent to share that good news with others.

There is no debate, *of course*, you are going to take that life-saving good news to those who've never heard it or need to hear it again.

Here's an example: LeBron James, some say greatest basketball player of all time who hosted the nationally televised commencement celebration for the class of 2020 high school students last week, for which President Obama was the keynote speaker. LeBron grew up and went to school in Akron, Ohio. He never left Akron. What he's done is build a k through 8 school that will give at risk kids, like he was, who suffer, like he did, from unstable homes the supports they need to get an education. LeBron knows that without the teachers and support he received he would never had made it to the NBA. He considers the founding of this school the most important accomplishment of his life. If you asked him if he feels blessed he'd say giving those kids a chance to live beyond their teenage years may be why he was blessed with all his basketball talent in the first place.

Or Barak Obama who, in his bid for the Illinois State Senate said, "I stand here knowing that my story is part of the larger American story, that I owe a debt to all of those who came before me, and that, in no other country on earth, is my story even possible."

What did he do? He and Michele founded the Obama leadership center that teaches young people to become leaders, just like he was given the opportunity to learn how to become a leader that led to him becoming president.

There are countless stories. When I was growing up in Pittsburgh we went to the local Carnegie Library. We learned that Mr. Carnegie—who immigrated with his poor Scots family and became one of the wealthiest people in the world as founder of U.S. Steel— built and funded nearly 4,000 libraries in the US, Canada, Scotland and several other countries. Carnegie credited the generosity of a Pittsburgh leader who made his personal library available to young "working boys" with giving him the "knowledge" to improve himself and become a great industrialist. One educator said Carnegie's libraries built at the turn of the 20th century transformed the US into a literate society.

When your life has been changed by some intervention of a person or organization without which your circumstances would have been dire if not disastrous you learn two things: empathy and gratitude. Empathy for those face the hardships you once faced; and gratitude for the help you got that saved your life.

And when your life has been changed, when you've been given a new life you *can't help* but share with others whatever it was that saved you.

It's the same knowing the love and care and presence of Jesus in your life, you want others to have that same reassurance, that same strength and power. Has Jesus, God or the Holy Spirit changed your life? Most of us could point to such moments when were made better than ourselves and that made all the difference. It doesn't matter what we call that power. What matters is that we were open to it, received it and let it change us.

One of the first times I had such an experience was in high school. It was my pastor who lead a very large and active Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh who found time on Saturday mornings to meet with a good friend and me to read the bible.

We were both asking questions about our faith and about life and we turned to the bible for answers. Bill Barker was a Greek and Hebrew scholar and he would walk us through his off the cuff translations of the original texts and point out the range and variety of readings that could be made of them.

The bible study was important, but what I remember is Rev. Barker's gracious, patient, generous friendship. He was the embodiment for me of how a follower of Jesus was supposed to act. I thought we were studying the bible but really my friend and I were given the opportunity to be close observers of a Christian life in action—which as I look back on it is really the question we were asking. What is a Christian? At that point, shortly after I lost my father and my mother remarried and we'd moved to a new community Rev. Barker gave me the ability to trust what I said at my confirmation a few years before. When other things I believed in were taken away Rev. Barker reassured me that my faith could never be taken away. At a turning point in my life that made all the difference.

Our witness to the saving grace of God is possible because Jesus is who he said he was: the one who suffered, died and was raised and who has ascended into heaven. The one who is present to us with people, through people, for people.

Paul is right, if Jesus didn't ascend then our faith is in vain and we are to be pitied. But he did rise to new life and he did ascend to the right hand of God and he does reign over the just and the unjust. These are not theories to be proved.

This is the language of faith. These are propositions to be trusted and lived.

John Ruskin that remarkable British writer, painter, environmentalist, and historian of art and architecture commenting on the painting by Giotto of the Ascension was perplexed that such a significant event in Christian history and doctrine didn't get more attention—like the nativity or crucifixion. The Ascension, he said, seems an afterthought by the theologians and artists, but without it Christ and his place in our faith and practice would be no more than a wise man and great teacher.

There are plenty of wise men and great teachers in the world. There is one risen Christ who makes all things new, including you and me even after we have fallen or question our faith, like I did back in the tenth grade (and more than a few times since), or like you did in some moment of despair.

Thank goodness for the Bill Barker's of the world who have been saved, sent and blessed. Thank goodness you and I have been saved, sent and blessed for this work.

We're living in a pandemic. The world has changed. Jobs have been lost, loved ones have died, people are searching for something that can be trusted that won't change. There is no greater gift we could give than the faith that holds us up and makes all things new even, when the world seems to be falling apart. Amen.