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In some ways, it's a shame that the Ascension of our Lord always takes place on a Thursday, exactly 40 days after Easter. Its a shame, because the Ascension is a pivotal event for us as believers, and we only tend to gather as a community on the weekends. Because Ascension Day IS a pivotal event, we consider it a principal feast of the Church, along with All Saints, Christmas, Epiphany, Easter, Pentecost and Trinity Sunday.¹ And because it is a principal feast and our parish is named for this pivotal event, we are celebrating it and focusing on it today.

Its a temptation to read the story of the Ascension as presented by Luke in his two books literally. And if we gave into this temptation then its a temptation too hard for me to resist to do the following: (eyes upward, fingers pointing) Look everyone! There goes Jesus! There he goes ... Look ... OH he was just here and we can't see him anymore! [end] I can't help but be reminded of the 1950s Superman TV show with George Reeves, "Look its a bird! It's a plane! It's ... Jesus! Taking the story literally makes it seem too fantastic and mystical to make it factual. So let's consider what Luke is trying to tell us in a more than literal way.

¹ *Book of Common Prayer, 15.*

First, we know that in Scripture using the number “40” is meant to signify “a long time.” Think of Moses and the Israelites “40 years wandering in the desert” or Jesus himself “40 days in the wilderness.” It isn’t factually 40 days or 40 years, but truthfully it is a long time. Its a span of time that allows us to move from an extraordinary event or moment into our ordinary, every day life. Luke is the only New Testament writer who identifies the period of time between the Resurrection and the Ascension as 40 days, and he only does so in Acts. Our other accounts have the Ascension occuring on Easter Day. So why might Luke want us to see a “long time” between the Resurrection and the Ascension?

Perhaps Luke recognizes that the disciples and other followers of Jesus were stunned at the Resurrection. It is such an extraordinary event that they needed a “long time” to aborb it, wrap their heads around it and make sense of it. For the church’s purposes, we purposefully celebrate the resurrection for a “long time” and during that “long time” those who shared the joyous service of Easter with us have either returned to their own parishes or are waiting to rejoin us at Christmas, and those of us who return Sunday after Sunday, are in our normal, faithful rhythm walking along in our Christian journey together. When we walk, pray, worship, and

have fellowship together as we did on Friday evening, we are becoming equipped for the mission that Jesus has left for us on that Ascension Day. More on the mission in a little bit.

Consider too that our passage from the Gospel is giving us a sense of Jesus presence for all of eternity: in the past, in the present and into the future. Think of all the times that Jesus has risen in each of these contexts. The very human Jesus, who breathed, lived, and walked as one of us was raised up on the cross. As a human being he was representative of all humankind, and of all of our brokenness. In this way, all of human kind was justified before God. Then Jesus was raised from the dead. In the resurrection, God has taken away those things that lead to death and non-existence. God through Jesus is the agent of healing. Finally, Jesus rises to “heaven.” Jesus returns to the place from which He came². In heaven, as we conceive of it, Jesus is above all that happens on earth, the right hand of God, ruler of all.

The Letter to the Ephesians helps us make some sense of the Ascension. With the Ascension, we have an ending to the prophetic ministry of Jesus and what his death and subsequent resurrection means.

² Geoffrey M. St. J. Hoare, “Pastoral Perspective,” *Feasting on the Word, Year C Vol 2*, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY) 2009. 518.

Jesus's ascension incorporates all that Jesus was, is and is to come into the life of God from where it came.³ With the Ascension both heaven AND earth are filled by Christ's presence. As such, then there is nothing and no one that can be considered insignificant or unimportant.⁴ This must be why the Good News *had to* go beyond the Jewish community and into the greater world.

Jesus left his disciples with hope and with a mission to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins. Through the lens that Luke provides us, this is truly Good News. In the Greek, "forgiveness" is liberation from captivity or repayment of financial obligations.⁵ The peasants in the Roman Empire lived lives under crushing debt that lead to involuntary servitude. Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer includes "forgive us our *debts*," and our Presbyterian friends among others use this version of the prayer. Luke really meant *debts*, not trespasses or sins. Luke understood "repentance" to mean "stop exploiting the poor." The entirety of Luke's

³ Joseph Britton, "Theological Perspective," *Feasting on the Word Year C Vol 2*, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville KY) 2009. 510.

⁴ Ibid, 514.

⁵ Peter J. B. Carmen, "Theological Perspective," *Feasting on the Word Year C Vol 2*, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville KY) 2009. 518.

Gospel can be read to mean that the Good News in Christ Jesus is “redemption of those chained by economic structures.”⁶

Jesus was aware that the mission he gave to us will exhaust us without spiritual sustenance. So we have a ten day wait, until Pentecost when we are given the gift of the Holy Spirit to take on the domination systems of our own day, those systems which make it seem like the powers of death have the upper hand.

By way of example, and since it's Mother's Day, I invite your awareness in how our culture and economic system continues to devalue women. Culturally, we believe that the most important job in the world is the care and nurturing of children. Should a person (no matter the gender) decide to devote full time care and attention to the raising of her (or his) progeny, that person is penalized by our social welfare system, in health insurance premiums, in career advancement, and in the amount one is paid when one is in or rejoins the work force. “But raising children is a choice!” one might protest. True enough. But if women don't make this choice, we die out. The same penalties are at play if we care enough for our aged

⁶ Ibid.

parents to look after them ourselves when they become unable to do so, yet we cannot afford professional care. Surely there is a better way.

I also invite you to notice how Hillary Clinton is talked about by her opponents and how she is perceived in the media. Whether you love her or hate her or are somewhere in between, just notice. If Hillary really rubs you the wrong way then consider Carly Fiorina or Megan Kelly. If any raises her voice is she considered shrill? trying to make herself heard? or passionate? If she is personally attacked, notice the words used. Are the words typically demeaning toward women, keeping her in her place? Then notice how the words affect you.

My American grandmother was among the first women in the United States eligible to vote. During my childhood, women were allowed to be elected to vestries. As I was finishing my undergraduate education, women could become priests in the Episcopal Church. In the words of the Virginia Slims ad, we've "come along way, baby" but we haven't fully arrived yet. The work to get us to this point was done by men and women together and corporately. It takes this kind of effort to change the world.

In our own parish community, we are deeply committed to meeting the survival needs of the poor. Women and children are disproportionately in

poverty than are men. Perhaps our next steps in our collective faith journey is to seek to eradicate those things that systemically keep women and children impoverished and vulnerable.

How do we do this? Certainly I have ideas as to particulars, and my ideas are just that: ideas. By themselves, they offer no cure all. What I know will give us sustenance for the effort however, is as a Christian community, we draw our strength to ensure justice in this world by progressing in our relationship with Christ. We live and learn in our parish communities. As we mature in our faith, we learn to see through the eyes of our heart. Franciscan Priest Richard Rohr, in his book *Falling Upwards*, says that maturity is “finally able to accept that reality *is what it is.*”⁷ He says that maturity in any religion allows us to be “always forgiving, compassionate, and radically inclusive.”⁸ We love as Jesus loves and we are moved to right wrongs as we see them. God has demonstrated to us again and again that God is committed to all of creation, including each and every one of us. Our commitment to God is to also be committed to God’s creation. And we can do it with God’s help. So we wait with eager anticipation for Pentecost and the gift of God’s Holy Spirit!

⁷ Rohr, Richard., *Falling Upward*, (Jossey-Bass:San Francisco) 2011, 7.

⁸ Ibid, 10.

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Acts 1:1-11/Luke 24:44-53

Ephesians 1:15-23

AMEN.