

The Ascension of the Lord_A
Mother Betsy
June 1, 2014

Today we are celebrating the Feast of the Ascension of The Lord. This Feast Day was May 29, but it has been a long standing tradition in the Church for the celebration of this feast to be transferred to the following Sunday which is usually before the feast of the Pentecost. I go to this length to explain this liturgical restructuring because it stands in irony of the modern Church's uneasiness with this day. It's more comfortable to acknowledge the Feast on a Thursday so we don't have to explain it on Sunday, but move onto the Lectionary for the Seventh Sunday of Easter. Unless you are one who accepts the Bible at face value, the act of Jesus' ascension, like his resurrection, is difficult to explain to the reasonably questioning mind. It is certainly 'a Christian-thing', but even we have a hard time understanding how this happened. The entertainment industry certainly has provided us with the means of expanding our imaginations to contemplate what might have happened when Jesus 'was lifted up'. For those of us who are or were Star Trek fans, having Scotty 'beam you up' certainly comes to mind. However we try to

fit the sensibility of Jesus' ascension into our modern understanding, it doesn't fit. It seems to have fit better in the understanding of the Gospel writer Luke's first century audience. They didn't have as much of a problem with accepting the mysteries of life like we do. But, even Luke doesn't put much emphasis on the action of Jesus' ascension. He's pretty nonchalant about as if it was no big deal. The disciples who witnessed Jesus ascending didn't seem shocked. In the text in the Acts of the Apostles, they stared up at his leaving, but Luke doesn't record their surprise. We get the sense, it's more like a gaze of 'Wow, he's really going', but Luke says nothing more about it. I think that was his clue that we don't have to explain it either. And, I think this is because for Luke Jesus' ascension is more about the mission he charged the disciples with before he left. For us now, Jesus' ascension is tied to how we the Church are responding to Jesus' charge of mission to us. In contemplating the meaning of Jesus' ascension to 'the right hand

of the Father', it seems appropriate to look at the mission Luke's Jesus left for us.

To prepare the disciples for the mission, he did Bible Study. He 'opened their minds to the Scriptures' so they could understand them in terms of what he had taught them, and what they had experienced with him through his being on earth with them. To contemplate this fully, we must go back to Jesus' own mission statement in the fourth chapter of Luke in which he states what he came to do: 'bring good news to the poor; release to the captives; bring sight to the blind; let the oppressed go free; and, proclaim the year of the Jubilee'. When he opened their minds to the Scripture, he was opening their minds, and ours, to interpretation of the Scripture in terms of his mission which was God's mission on earth. His ascension means that his mission is now the disciples' mission. And it became our mission as the Church. (How well have we done?)

Jesus next charged the disciples with what I see as the 'Back to the Future' aspect of the mission he left with them. He told them

to proclaim repentance and forgiveness in his name to all nations, that's the look-back part, and to be a witness to the ends of the earth, the future. He instructs us to let people know they can turn their lives around and be forgiven for not being in relationship with God as God had set forth. Going back to Jesus' mission, if we haven't done the things that God sent him here to show us how to do, there's still time for turning around, and there's forgiveness for not having done the right thing the first time. This is the good news. Further, we must be witnesses to this good news to everyone so that the future of the world will be changed by the changes we made to our past.

Then, Jesus told the disciples to wait on the promise of the Father. Wait 'to be clothed with the power from on high'. In first century Palestine, people were known and defined by how they were dressed. To be clothed by God was to be defined by God's mission. We are to witness in Jesus' name, but we are to wait until we have been empowered by God to be witnesses. Just as we needed Jesus to show us what and how, we need to wait for

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the power to give us the authority to do. We get the charge of mission before we get the surge of the Holy Spirit that will empower us to carry it through. I think that in the history of the Church, we have not waited most of the time for the power of the Holy Spirit, but have surged forth on what we have perceived as our own power, mistaking it for the authority of the Holy Spirit. It is at these times of our history that we have stooped to our lowest levels. When we have proclaimed repentance and forgiveness in the name of the Church, and not in Jesus' name, as he charged us to do, we have proclaimed falsely. We as the Church can never be the body without the Triune God being the head. Although Jesus ascended from us to leave his mission to us, he charged us not to go it alone, but to go empowered by God. When we wait for God's authority, we are at our best as the body of Christ.

Mother Barbara preached last Sunday on why she was a Christian, and it got me to thinking about why I am a Christian, too. I had long ago affirmed why, but I am a Christian because I

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think we do love better than anyone else. This assumes that other religions promote love as well which I think they do. But I think we do it best, or have the best potential for doing it best because of what we have learned, and continue to learn about God's love through Christ Jesus. Here with the Ascension of Jesus, God is doing it again: trusting us in the name of God's love for us. All through the Hebrew Bible, time and time again, God gave us the reins to carry out the mission of love. With the Ascension, God lifted Jesus from us, trusting us to carry out the mission he sent through Jesus. This is love based on trust. Is there a better example of how to love one another? Heck, if we gave each other all the chances that God has given us in the name of love, we would be living in a world that would more resemble the kingdom of heaven, hint, hint. The charge of mission that Jesus left us with is a charge to love each other better to enable the kingdom to take form. This is the Church as the completeness of Jesus' mission that the Pauline letter to the Ephesians is referring. I have to push-back against the 'Church

triumphant'¹ theme of this passage because we as the Church are still 'coming to know Jesus' (v. 17). We are still seeking 'the spirit of wisdom and revelation' that comes with knowing Jesus. We are still working our way through the charge of the mission he left us. And, I think that is what gives us the best potential for doing love best, because God as Christ Jesus does love so well. If we the Church show our love through our witness of God's love for us, and love each other through the empowered mission conferred on us by Christ Jesus, we are lifted up with Christ, and that is far higher than we can lift ourselves. And, then, we will be able to lay claim to being the fullness of him as the Church because we proclaimed the good news of repentance and forgiveness, we witnessed it to everyone and we loved well by carrying out Jesus' mission. May we always strive to be high and lifted up with Christ. Amen.

¹ Murray, Debra Dean. "Ascension Politics". Ekklesia Project.
<http://www.ekklesiaproject.org/blog/2009/05/ascension-politics>. 19 May 2009.