

May 29, 2022 Easter 7C and Ascension  
The Choice of Glory  
Acts 1 and John 17

This past Thursday marked 40 days since Easter. This is the day we recognize as the ascension of Jesus. We started our worship service with a reading from Acts 1 detailing this event. Our Gospel reading details an event that happened 43 days earlier—the night before Jesus’ death when He prays intimately for His disciples. Next Sunday is Pentecost—when we celebrate the pouring out of God’s Holy Spirit and the beginning of the mobilization of the church. I wonder what was going through the disciples minds. They had been with Jesus for three years. What were they remembering from the last three years?

And I found myself asking the same question. The last three years-- We had another brutal mass killing this week, the second in 10 days and I have lost count of many in the last 3 years. We marked 2 years since the death of George Floyd. We are still dealing with the effects of the pandemic. I know good stuff has happened in the last 3 years but I am having trouble recalling it. The disciples, like we, had lived through something awful and wonderful and traumatic and miraculous and unprecedented. And now, who would they be? Who will *we* be, as a result of all this?

Let us imagine the disciples, gazing up into heaven, witnessing yet another miracle, and wondering that exact thing — the same thing that we now wonder about the future of our world. It’s a question that anyone who has ever lived through a significant event has wondered. You can even hear the question echoing through the very pages of the Bible, after every story from the Garden of Eden to the Exodus, to the fall and destruction of Jerusalem in the Old Testament, to the foot of the cross and all the way through the Ascension and Pentecost.

*Who are we going to be after this?*

Who has this event made us? How has it shaped us?

How are these extraordinary things that are happening changing us and shaping us in ways that we can only begin to imagine right now? Our parents and grandparents wondered it while wars raged, and plagues took their toll, and other great events occurred.

*After all of this ends — who will we be?*

As we begin to see the possibility of normalcy on the horizon, at least where COVID is concerned, this is a thing that we wonder, and that would serve us well to consider.

Everyone in crisis turns into a moody teenager, in a way. We think, “No one has ever gone through anything this bad. No one would understand!” But it’s never true.

Our history books and the Bible tie up all of these monumental stories with these nice endings, and that can be deceptive to us. How easily we forget that the people who were *in* those stories didn’t know those endings until they happened. We are living through history, and we, just like everyone who has ever lived through a significant event, have felt lost and afraid and angry and *really*, this whole time, have just wanted a return to normalcy. Everyone who has ever lived through a war has dreamed of a time when they could go out in safety and calm again. We are not living through a war, but there are some parallels.

We, too, dream of normalcy. I want to live in a world where kids can go to school without fear of being killed. I want to live in a world where I can hug someone without fear of catching a disease which will put me in quarantine for 5-10 days. I want to live in a world where my stomach doesn’t turn into knots every time I hear the words “special report” and “breaking news.”

Someday, children who have yet to be born, will read their history books and see how all of this ended, but they will not know what we have lived through. Not really. Not as intimately. In the same way that we do not truly know the events that we did not live through. We do not know the fear and anxieties of war until we have lived through one. We don’t know the hardship of national crisis until we live through it. In the same way, children yet to be born will not understand the coronavirus pandemic or Uvalde, TX or Buffalo, NY when they read about it in their history books.

Yes, they will see the photographs of the angry protestors and the people in masks at the grocery store and on the street. They will get to know the names of the activists and heroes who did something about the gun problem. They will see the photos of outdoor church services. They will read politicians’ speeches and learn about famous scientists who developed safety protocols and vaccines. They will learn of the mistakes and triumphs

of this time. The ones who are especially emotionally intelligent and empathetic will be able to imagine the fear and the anger and the frustration that we feel right now, but they will not *know* it. We should pray they never do.

*Who are we going to be after this?*

We, too, don't know what it must have been like to live through Christianity's first days. In this story, with Jesus floating off into the sky, the disciples must have wondered, "Who are we going to be after this?"

After all they've seen, they can now no longer go back to their lives before they met the carpenter turned rabbi from Galilee. They wanted answers, too. Before Jesus ascended, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"

In much the same way, for the past many months, we have asked anyone who might know when some signs of normalcy might be restored to us.

We are lucky enough to have the story of Jesus and the disciples nicely bound in the pages of our Bibles and in our history books. We know how everything turned out: the Church got started, the Gospel spread, and Christians ended up doing some really great things and some really awful things in Jesus' name for 2,000 years. And now, in 2022, we were also not the first to experience violence or to be kept away from our church sanctuaries by the threat of communicable disease.

The disciples, for their part, knew none of that history. All they knew is that they were now part of something extraordinary, and something hard, that had yet to work itself out. They didn't yet fully understand their part in it or its impact on them. They just knew that their lives were changed forever.

*Who are we going to be after this?*

The answer was up to them. And the answer, now, is up to us.

As we imagine Christ floating far up into the sky on this Ascension Day, we wait with the disciples for the coming of Pentecost. One last note on the Gospel:

*While Jesus was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward 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."*

This moment is a bit funny. We imagine the disciples gazing up, mouths open, and some angels coming by and saying those words.

*"This Jesus, who has been taken up into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."*

Now let's look at Gospel lesson for a moment.

*"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity."*

How does this prayer of Jesus get answered? From where do the unity and the glory come? How does violence end? The answers come from the words of Jesus and the angels on Ascension Day.

You will be my witnesses. Don't stand there and wait for something to happen. Go, be witnesses in all the different parts of your life. Love people. Make peace. Bring justice. Share Jesus. That's our glory.

We are one in Christ Jesus. We are bound together in love. And Christ is with us still, and that *is* enough. That's our unity.

No, we don't know how this all ends. But we are not the first to feel uncertain. So, "who are we going to be after this?"

We are, were, and will be God's own beloved people, fully human, and fully loved. That's all we've got, and in a violent world, pandemic world, that's all we'll ever need. Amen.