

May 16, 2020

7 Easter

Before we start our worship, I need to explain some things about our worship. On Friday our bishop Marty Stebbins gave us some updated directions, in light of new guidance from the CDC:

- As of Sunday, May 16th, masks will be optional for fully vaccinated people. Please do not ask people why they may choose to continue to wear a mask; that is just plain rude.
- The use of hand sanitizer is still required.
- Masks must remain available to any visitors or parishioners who wish to wear one and have forgotten theirs.
- Because there will be a mix of both vaccinated and unvaccinated people, no indoor congregational singing without masks. This allows us time to verify that there is no surge in cases from the lack of mask-wearing. We will reassess in two weeks.
- The common cup at communion is still not to be used. That will be reassessed in two weeks.

The point about congregational singing is especially important at St James today because (I'm happy to say) Mary McTavish is back at the keyboard. We've been missing you! Thanks very much for playing! She will be playing some familiar hymns as we proceed. Many of us will surely want to sing along. But in light of the bishop's words, if you do sing along, please wear a

mask. We can always just hum quietly. It will all be reassessed within two weeks. And we thank you for your attention to these group norms.

For our prelude Mary will now play hymn 213. You may remain seated.

Greetings friends, it has been six weeks since I was with you last on a Sunday, and quite a lot has happened in the church year in that time. Let me get us caught up with our storyline, then try to see what today's lessons have to tell us.

On Easter Day of course Jesus made himself known as the risen Lord, first to Mary Magdalene, and then to his other followers, including Thomas, who was missing in action on Easter Day, but eventually caught up with the rest. Then for several weeks Jesus continued to interact periodically with his followers, coming and going in a mysterious way, but sharing food and conversation with them. Then forty days after the resurrection his followers (to quote our first lesson) witnessed Jesus "taken up from us." That was Ascension Day, which some of us were able to celebrate here together Thursday evening, three days ago. At that service, we heard how Jesus departed from them in a final manner, going up into the clouds, but not just floating off: rather (to quote the collect from Thursday's service) "he ascended far above all heavens that he might fill all things." Thus Christ is

now present everywhere: everywhere on earth, to be sure, but even beyond that: Christ the risen Lord is present in the cosmos as a whole. On Thursday I suggested that he embraces the cosmos: like the old hymn says, “He has the whole world in his hands.” Which brings us to today.

Now it was all well and good for Jesus to be taken up with great triumph. I’m sure the disciples were happy for him, and saw his exaltation to heaven as being totally appropriate. But there was an unavoidably anxious aspect to the situation also. This anxious aspect is referred to in the collect of the day, which we prayed a few minutes ago. That prayer begs God, “leave us not comfortless.” The disciples were happy, but they also needed comfort. There was a new void in their lives. Even though they knew that on some level Jesus really was with still them, nevertheless things were now different. They felt in their bones what it is like to be on their own. They did not have him there in the flesh to turn to in case of need. As we will learn next week, it would be ten long days before their Comfort would come, in the form of the Holy Spirit. But now, for today, we can easily imagine that they were just not quite sure of themselves. It was an uncomfortable and awkward time of waiting. It was their downtime. They didn’t try to do much; instead they devoted themselves to prayer.

But, interestingly, our lessons inform us not primarily about the prayers of the disciples—what they were saying-- but about the prayers of Jesus—what he was saying. Jesus, it seems, was praying too. In our Gospel from John, quite a lengthy passage, Jesus talks to God about his followers, and his concerns for them after his departure from them. The passage is actually from just before Jesus’ crucifixion, but it does show the kind of

thing that was on Jesus' mind, and it works equally well as a snapshot of his thinking after his Ascension.

Here is what was on Jesus' mind, the night before he died. Praying to God he said, "Now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one." These words feel very human, do they not! Anyone who has cared for and guarded another, will worry what will happen when they cannot protect that one any longer.

Parents whose little ones go off to school for the first time feel this. "What will happen?" they fret. "How will they fare? Do they have the resilience and inner resources to succeed in school?" Many a parent has turned to prayer, when that day comes. "Holy God, protect them!" they say. It is a tender and touching moment to see Jesus, like us, confronting the reality that in order to grow, the formerly dependent ones now must figure things out on their own.

Then Jesus adds, "I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one."

Sometimes I think it actually would be quite nice to be taken out of the world. What with Covid, and polarization, and war, and drought and so forth, why not just float up to the clouds like Jesus did and get away from it once and for all? Well, the answer is pretty obvious: I don't know how to float up to the clouds. I'm stuck here. We all are, and Jesus knows this too. Our place is here, at ground level. Somehow, we have to find our way through all the problems that this world imposes on us. By the way, when

John's Gospel talks about "this world," it does not mean the natural order with all its created beauty. In John's Gospel "the world" is kind of a technical term meaning our human world, and, on the whole, it is not a positive term. "The world" is a place of polarization and selfishness and greed and hatred and mistrust. God loves the world to be sure; nevertheless "The world" can be a spiritual minefield for us. We must find our way through, hopefully making it better, not worse. So Jesus asks a second time for us to be protected, this time from "the evil one."

So a couple of points here. One is that our lessons give us a picture of what Jesus has been doing, and surely is still doing, now that he has been "taken up from us." Jesus is now, and long has been, at prayer: for us. He may be gone, but we are not forgotten. He is speaking up for us where it counts, at the very throne of grace. He has gone "now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf," as the Letter to the Hebrews puts it. That is a reassuring and inspiring picture of what Jesus is up to, now that he has gone to fill all things.

The second point is actually a question: how much help do we think it is for Christ Jesus to be praying for us? Here on earth when people say, "Oh I will pray for you," it sometimes comes across that really they just don't want to get involved so they mutter a platitude to keep our problem at arms' length. But is Jesus' prayer like that? Not likely! Given everything we know about Jesus, isn't it actually more likely that he is very willing to get involved, and that his prayer is powerful and effective, and that God is listening carefully to everything he asks?

In that case, the fact Jesus is even now hard at work praying for us in such a humane way, is pretty awesome. As a result of Jesus' prayer, we have surely been protected from evil in ways that we can't imagine, and for which we never suspected we were at risk. Good things that we cannot account for have no doubt come our way because of Jesus' prayers. And the most splendid gift of all, the gift of the Holy Spirit, which is something we will hear more about one week from today so I won't say much about it right now, only this: with the gift of the Holy Spirit we find that we are not alone at all. We are guarded and guided along life's way, and all because Christ Jesus prayed for it, interceding for us there at the very throne of grace, after he ascended far above all heavens to fill all things.

These ten days between Jesus' Ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit are to my mind among the most interesting of the church year. They invite us to think about what life would be like if we truly were on our own, all the while assuring us that we are not alone, and that-- by the way-- amazing things are coming. It's quite a mix: but we are praying, and Jesus is praying, and somehow it all works together. I believe we can be grateful for this down time in the church year, and for other downtimes in life. They give us a chance to catch our breath. And we will need to catch our breath, because before long the Breath of God will blow us somewhere entirely new.