

Psalm 47 ~ Luke 24:44-53

Where is Jesus?

Ascension of the Lord (7th Sunday of Easter)~ Mother's Day ~ May 12, 2024

The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Introduction to Gospel Lesson

"Ascension of the Lord Day", traditionally observed 40 days after Easter, was actually this past Thursday, May 9, this year. But who goes to church on Thursday? That's why we are celebrating Ascension today—a day that Barbara Brown Taylor has called, "our least celebrated and most forgotten feast day."

As I read the final verses of the final chapter in Luke's gospel, which also serves as the connecting link to the Book of Acts, Luke's second volume. The first part of today's Ascension reading begins at the *end* of the story I preached about on April 14: where hungry Jesus asks his disciples, "Have you any fish to eat." Yup that one. If it sounds oddly familiar – that is why! We pick up the story right after hungry risen Lord Jesus gobbled up his fish.

Let us open *our minds* to understand the scriptures and open *our ears* to listen for the whisper of the Spirit through the word in this reading of Luke 24:44-53.

Sermon

How do you like split pea soup. Anybody's favorite soup? (*Hands*) Least favorite? (*Hands*) Or maybe just "meh." No strong feelings about pea soup either way. (*Hands.*) You might feel differently about pea soup if you heard the story about what Martin Luther said, yes, the German priest, and reformer, Martin Luther, said, about it in the early days of what became the Protestant Reformation. Luther was known to have taunted Ulrich Zwingli, the Swiss reformer, with the claim that Christ's body could be found everywhere, even in a peasant's bowl of pea soup.¹ So, change of plans: we've decided in honor of Ascension Sunday, we will be serving pea soup rather than cake and cookies at Second Sunday Breads/Reception today. Just kidding.

Luther's point was the omni-presence of the ascended Christ. Our Lord and Savior was no longer limited by time and space as he was prior to his Ascension. Even the mysteriously appearing and reappearing Risen Christ could only be in one place at a time. After his Ascension Christ could be in the pea soup *and* up in the clouds on high: one and the same again with God who is "king over the nations; sitting on his holy throne, highly exalted, as we heard exultantly described in Psalm 47.

You see: Ascension of the Lord is not so much about getting the body of Jesus off the earth. Nor is it about trying to explain the literal metaphysics of this phenomenon. Rather, it's a festival primarily about the presence of Jesus transformed into a cosmic rule. Christ now in heaven--beyond a specific culture, time, or gender, as he had been while walking this earth among us. The ascended Christ is now in the pea soup; and at the same time present wherever two or three are gathered in his name; present at the breaking of the bread; present in every

person who is hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, a stranger, a prisoner. Present to everyone who chooses to accept the divine invitation to "Abide in me. Abide in my love."

The ultimate power of the Cosmic Christ is unlike any power or ruler on earth. Our foot washing, mortally wounded, suffering servant-Lord has a whole different operating procedure than any other King or would-be King on this earth. This power from on high, binds us together in a vision that lies underneath all that divides us. As Father Richard Rohr has written, "there is a God-size hole in all of us. God creates the very dissatisfaction that only grace and finally divine love can satisfy... God hides and is found, precisely in the *depths* of everything—even and especially in the deep fathoming of our fallings and failures. Sin is to stay on the surface of even holy things, like the Bible, sacraments, or church."ⁱⁱⁱ

Beloved Community, I hear the Ascension calling us this year to go beneath the surface of our daily walk as individuals and as a church. To go beneath the surface of what we mean when we say we are a Matthew 25 church. Or when we say we are a "More Light" church. Or as our FPC Mission Statement challenges us, to be agents of God's transforming power... attending to the love of Jesus Christ in our midst." And by "agents" I don't think we mean "secret agents." Remember that 60's show, and song, *Secret Agent Man*? That is *not* our song or our call.

The Risen Christ ascended upward so we could go outward. Called out of ourselves. Called out into our world that is doubling over with pain and anguish: To look outward and underneath the surface upon all the people who woke up today not sure they can make it through another day, considering if suicide is the only way to end the pain. All the people suffering from debilitating diseases and addictions; all the people who happen to live in places torn apart by war like Gaza, Ukraine, Sudan, Nigeria; all people who are being held hostage; all people who are incarcerated; all people who woke up today still seeking asylum in a foreign land, just so their family can be safe. Where is Cosmic Christ now? With all people who are on the edge. That is where Jesus is now. And that is where Jesus is calling us to serve: to "Edge-Walkers" who seek to heal, to be the hand of hope, to partner in the work of making, this Cosmic, Divine Love visible.

The anthem our choir sang so beautifully, "O Love" by Elaine Hagenberg, is a newer musical setting to the words written by George Matheson in Scotland in 1881. I want to tell you about the backstory of this hymn. Twenty years earlier, when he was just twenty years old, George was engaged to be married, but learned that his vision, which was beginning to be difficult, was a condition that would cause him to become blind. When his fiancé learned of his diagnosis, she decided to leave him, rather than marry a man who would lose his sight. After writing two theology books George did lose his sight completely. So, George turned from academic work to pastoral ministry, preaching weekly to a congregation of over 1500 members. He was only able to do this work with the daily help of his sister.

However, the day came in 1881 when his sister was to be married and no longer able to be his assistant. The evening before his sister's wedding when George's whole family had left him alone to get ready for the next day's celebration, it all hit him. Hard. You can imagine what a

lonely, dark, desperate moment that must have been. Now he was facing the rest of his life without the one person who had come through for him. Surely memories of his own failed wedding day also flooded back with fresh waves of grief washing over him. It was in the darkness of that moment that George Matheson wrote this hymn. Later he remarked that it took him just five minutes to write these words – the only hymn he ever wrote that required no editing. This hymn that begins with this line: *“O love that will not let me go, I rest my weary soul in thee.”*

Where is Jesus now? Jesus is the love that will not let you go. Jesus is the love that will not let us go. Or the world go. Perhaps, life has been hitting you hard. And you are feeling low. Maybe you are facing problems, setbacks, or decisions that feel overwhelming, unsolvable. Wherever you are, Jesus is right there with you in that valley. And will not let you go. We know this because Jesus went down all the way down for us. And then was raised from the dead, and after 40 days, ascended into heaven. And now it is up to us, Beloved Community, be the hand of Jesus present, open, ready to do what we can, to lift up others. To lift up the world. We have been clothed with power from on high that we may be Christ’s body: the footprints, handprints, heart prints now of Christ on earth.

It begins here. *(point to heart)* It grows here. *(point to whole church)*. Friends, this Love that will not us go is beyond rational explanation or creed. Jesus’ Love that will not let us go: is something we live and experience. It is better expressed in music and in song. So let us close this sermon together, singing this hymn the George Matheson wrote from the depths of despair one of his darkest nights, it’s in our hymnbooks #833, “O Love That Wilt Not let Me Go,” Let’s sing just stanzas 1 and 2, as a prayer, staying seated in our pews.

*O Love that will not let me go, I rest my weary soul in thee;
I give thee back the life I owe, That in thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.*

*O Light that foll’west all my way, I yield my flick’ring torch to thee;
My heart restores its borrowed ray, That in thy sunshine’s blaze its day
May brighter, fairer be.*

Amen.

Apologies for footnotes out of sequence:

ⁱⁱⁱ<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/o-love-that-will-not-let-me-go/>

ⁱⁱAdapted from Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*, (Jossey-Bass: Hoboken, NJ, 2024), pp.59-60. (As quoted in Center for Action and Contemplation, Richard Rohr’s Daily Meditations, May 9, 2024.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/christ-present-everywhere>