

May 24, 2020
Acts 1:1-11
Luke 24:44-53

Ascension Day (transferred)
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Emmanuel, Norwood, MA
Zoom Worship

How Ascension Day Lifted Me Up

About a month ago, I deleted almost everything off of my calendar. With the tap of a finger, away went basketball practices and basketball games, flag football practices, soccer practices and games, honor chorus and a cappella rehearsals, concerts, promotion ceremonies, field trips, voice lessons, play rehearsals, the actual plays themselves, karate classes, Confirmation classes, a Confirmation lock in, Confirmation itself, First Communion classes, First Communion for four children from Emmanuel, Synod Assembly, visits from family, sabbatical. Poof, with a tap of my finger it was all gone, like it had never been.

Because I use the calendar app on my phone, I didn't have to manually cross anything off. The events are just gone, like they never were. There is no messy paper calendar to look at to remind me of what would have been. There's just a vague memory of the life we expected to be having, replaced with the life that we are having.

Of course, as part of the 2020 calendar 2.0 process, I also added some things. I didn't cancel worship entirely in my scheduled I just changed the time from two services to one and I changed the location from Emmanuel, 24 Berwick Street, Norwood, MA to Zoom. I cancelled Wednesday Confirmation classes and Bible Study, but I added every other week Confirmation class Zoom check ins and Zoom Wednesday evening prayer group. Thanks to the ingenuity of the Karate studio John and Abigail go to, I added Zoom Karate classes.

Still my schedule that I loved, my schedule that was full of things that I was looking forward to, my schedule that was a feast of fun, community, communion, learning, and joy, is a desolate wasteland compared to what it once was.

I talked last week about the fact that one of the things that is so hard for me about this situation that we're all facing is that there is just nothing concrete to look forward to.

I mean, I know that one of these days we'll go back to in person worship. I know that one of these days, choirs and choruses will start singing again. I know that one of these days we'll be able to travel again. I know that one of these days we'll be able to see our long-distance family members and friends again and give them a hug.

I just don't know when. I've found it difficult to look forward to abstract joys. Living in the moment is the requirement and the challenge of this time, and I'm just not very good at it.

So, last week I was in that place, nothing to look forward to, nothing to get excited about just keep putting one foot in front of the other, one day after another, so that the days blur together.

Thank goodness for worship. In fact, one of the things that mental health professionals say that religion can offer people for such a time as this is the ability to mark time. A weekly gathering to help people orient themselves in time and recognize that they are not completely adrift in a sea of meaninglessness.

So, mark time we have. Lent, then Holy Week, then Easter, then the Sundays after Easter. And then, there it was, rising up for me like a shining beacon out of the busyness but also the sameness of another week. Ascension Day, a Thursday to celebrate.

Some of you might remember that when I first got to Emmanuel, as our first Easter season together approached, I proposed that we have an outdoor Ascension Day celebration on actual Ascension Day, which always falls on a Thursday, forty days after Easter and ten days before Pentecost.

I thought that it might be fun for our church family to get together in the middle of the week for a celebration, something informal and uplifting, a different way of celebrating the church year.

I proposed that we get together in the park across the street for a “Bring Your Own Picnic” Ascension Day celebration. People could bring their own food, I could bring toys that go up for us to play with, and with light hearts, we could commemorate the Ascension. I planned a brief worship service for the occasion and we gave it a try.

The first year, about 20 people showed up. I thought that it might turn into a growing celebration.

The next year it rained on Ascension Day. Hard. We had to move the celebration indoors. People still showed up, but fewer people. The next year, we planned our Ascension Day picnic again, but again, it rained. And fewer people showed up. The next year the weather was decent, and we were able to have the celebration outdoors again, but attendance was about half what it was that first year. The energy seemed to have leaked out of the celebration.

A favorite history teacher of mine in high school used to say, “There is nothing so powerful as an idea whose time has come.” Well, after two years of rain and one year of lackluster attendance, the worship team decided that the time had not come for our congregational Ascension Day picnic. Last year, 2019, we didn’t have it. We did what we did this year and transferred the celebration of Ascension Day to the Sunday following Ascension.

Last year, on the actual Thursday of Ascension Day 2019, I mentioned something about it being Ascension Day and Cyrus said, “Oh, when are we going to have our picnic?”

I said, “What do you mean?”

He said, “Every year on Ascension Day we have a picnic and we play with things that go up.”

And, of course, he was right.

He had just turned four when we moved here. He doesn't have a lot of memories of life before Emmanuel, so, the only Ascension Days that he can remember are the ones when we had, indoors or outdoors, an Ascension Day celebration that included scripture readings, food, fellowship, music, prayer, and perhaps most importantly to a child, who was 4, 5, 6, and 7 years old at the time, play.

But last year I had to tell him, "Oh, we're not doing that this year. We're going to celebrate Ascension in church on Sunday."

He was so disappointed. Because a worship service with specific readings and particular hymns simply doesn't replace the novelty of spending a weekday evening in a park and calling it church. Eating dinner, and throwing footballs, blowing bubbles, playing with stomp rockets, and paper airplanes and kites, especially with adults who rarely have time to play at all and even more rarely on a weeknight.

Now, when this conversation took place, it was 2019. It was a Thursday night. I hadn't cleared my schedule, for an Ascension Day celebration, which meant that we had honor chorus rehearsal, and soccer practice, and Karate and choir. There just wasn't time to throw in an Ascension Day picnic, even just for our family. We hadn't made time for it.

I was shocked to see how disappointed that Cyrus was. I had no idea that it meant so much to him, that it was something that he would remember from year to year.

So, this year, when it dawned on my that Ascension Day was coming up, I decided that the Warners were going to have a party. I knew that we would be celebrating the Ascension in worship today, but still, I decided that we needed a celebration, a way to reconnect with each other, a way to mark the passage of time, a way to change up the monotony of our days, a way in the wilderness, not just acknowledge, but to celebrate the presence of God in our lives.

So, on a finally not rainy Ascension Thursday night, we marched into the park, and at a distance from the few other people who were spending part of their evening in the park, we played catch and monkey in the middle with balls and a frisbee. We blew bubbles, we flew a kite and launched stomp rockets into the air. Then we read the Ascension Day gospel and sang a song,

*You came from heaven to earth to show the way, from the earth to the cross,
my debt to pay, from the cross to the grave from the grave to the sky, Lord
I lift your name on high.*

There are a lot of things that I don't know about what's going to happen and when, but one thing that can never be taken away from me, from you, from all who share our faith and is the rhythm of the church year and the joy that it brings. Weekly worship to gather, in whatever way that we can, with Zoom, with YouTube, with an emailed bulletin and sermon, even just with fellowship in prayer, and those festivals, that sometimes pop up in the middle of a week, to give us a lift, to remind us that God is with us. We are not alone. To remind us that the kingdom of God has come near and that we are we are moving toward its fulfillment. To remind us that in Jesus Christ, time, even ordinary time is made holy for it is lived in the light of God.

So, I am all about celebrating the Ascension, perhaps this year more than ever. But I'll admit, there is something about the Ascension that I have never been able to understand.

I get that it's important. I mean, without the Ascension Jesus would have been stuck in one time and one place, for eternity.

After all, the post resurrection stories about Jesus tell us that he was he was able to do extraordinary things. One of those extraordinary things was being able to disappear and reappear at will.

One moment he was breaking bread with the two disciples in Emmaus and the next moment he was gone.

He appeared with the disciples without seemingly going through doors, just being among them, with no warning, offering them peace.

He moves from Jerusalem to places in the Galilee, without any travel being described or any time seeming to pass.

Jesus is clearly not bound, after the resurrection, by the same limitations of space as he is with his very human body, before his resurrection.

But one thing that the post resurrection stories about Jesus never say is that he can be at two places at once. He can be with many people in rapid succession but he can't be in more than one place at once.

So, when he was with the disciples in Emmaus, he was not with the disciples in Jerusalem.

If he was interacting with Mary at the tomb, he was not with Peter in the upper room.

The Ascension is something for us to celebrate, because by ascending to the Father and being present to us through the Holy Spirit, it became possible for Jesus, the living Lord of resurrection to be present to more than one person, more than one group at once.

This is wonderful news. It means Jesus is with us.

Jesus is with each one of us in our homes as we worship. Jesus is with the other Christians, similarly locked down, throughout the world. It means that Jesus is with our families who we cannot be with. It means that Jesus is with the friends we cannot worship with in actual, and not just virtual, person today. Perhaps this year, of all years, I understand why the Ascension is important in an even deeper way than I ever have before.

The Ascension means that the resurrected Jesus is present in every situation that worries us, throughout the world. It means that Jesus is with people who are

homeless, and people who minister to them. It means that Jesus is with people who live in terror of bombs coming in the night. It means that Jesus is with soldiers and sailors long separated from their families. It means that Jesus is with essential workers exhausted from their long and isolating toil.

The Ascension teaches us that Jesus is Emmanuel, that Jesus is with us across time and space. This is very good news all of the time, but perhaps we can feel the goodness of that news now more than ever.

But what I don't understand is why the disciples were so excited about it.

I mean, they had Jesus back. They had thought that they had lost him. He had died and been buried, and then, all of a sudden, miraculously, gloriously, inexplicably, he was back, with power and authority, with peace and joy flowing out of him.

They had him back and I can imagine them picturing years and years of enjoying this presence with them, his teaching, his fellowship, savoring his abundance, experiencing his healing power, just reveling his presence.

And then, all too soon, he was telling them goodbye. He told them to expect another gift, another blessing, but then he left them. They saw him ascend into heaven.

I always thought that maybe that would have been a time of distress for them. I mean, where was Jesus going, why was he leaving them, again? Leaving them with a nebulous promise, of what the father had promised, a mysterious power from on high, that they might not have even understood.

It would have made sense to me if they had grieved, if they had gotten angry, if they had fallen into despair when Jesus left, when what they might have thought and hoped would happen turned out not be to be what actually did happen. As one who has very recently set my hopes on how I thought that things were going to be, I would have understood. I could have related if the Ascension Day gospel

told the story of an apostolic tantrum, as Peter and the others watched Jesus ascend into heaven.

But, of course, that's not what the text says happened. The text says, this, "And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God."

Their response to the Ascension was worship, unbroken praise and adoration of the one that they called friend, teacher, healer, and Lord. Their response to the Ascension was great joy. Their response to Jesus' Ascension was fellowship and trust.

It seems that at long last Jesus' followers; the followers who wondered and questioned, the followers who doubted and denied, the followers who fell asleep, the followers who ran away, the followers who hid in an upper room, certainly, with no thought that they would see a resurrected Jesus in their midst, those followers, finally, miraculously understood. And when Jesus ascended, they didn't fall apart, they didn't run and hide, they didn't grieve, they rejoiced.

Maybe they had finally learned to trust that God had a plan. Maybe the resurrection had taught them that Jesus wasn't something, someone, that they could keep to themselves. Perhaps they understood that he was not just Lord for them, a private, pet, tamed Messiah, but the Lord of the whole heaven and the whole earth, Lord, healer, savior, for the whole world and for all of the people.

Perhaps, because he had opened their minds to understand the scriptures, they were able to give up something that they treasured, something that they valued, that lived intimacy with Jesus, so that they could share it. So that they could share the peace that Jesus gave them with others. So that they could share the healing of the minds, and souls, that they experienced in Jesus' presence with others. So that they could share the joy of intimacy with God, with others. Perhaps they finally understood that faith in this Jesus, was not about grasping, and clinging and getting something for themselves.

Perhaps they finally understood that the gifts that Jesus gave them were gifts to be not to be hoarded, but to be shared.

Perhaps they finally understood, with their minds opened to understand the scriptures, not that things were going to be the way that they imagined they would be, not that things were going to be the way that they necessarily wanted things to be, but perhaps they finally understood that in Jesus, in his life, in his death, in his resurrection, and in his Ascension, God was at work. God was at work with power and mystery and love and blessing, for the healing of the whole world. And so, they worshiped. And so, they rejoiced. Thanks be to God. Amen.