

The Ascension, year of our Lord 2020

Acts 1:1-11

Toronto United Mennonite Church

May 24, 2020

This is Ascension Sunday – marking the day that Jesus ascended into heaven, forty days after Easter. Ascension Day was actually on Thursday this week. We are coming to the end of the Easter Season – Easter ends with Pentecost, next week.

I have always found Easter to be a challenging season in the church year.

Easter challenges our minds – that is, how we *think*. It confronts us with the resurrection: the miracle at the heart of Christian faith; an event that our minds can find hard to accept. We sometimes find it hard to believe.

Most of the Gospel stories about the appearances of Jesus after Easter are intended to prove the reality of the resurrection. Our reading from Acts this morning says exactly that, in verse three: It says: “After his suffering, Jesus presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs.”

Christians have debated about what we should *think* about the resurrection for over two thousand years. Individual Christians have different ideas about what actually happened with the resurrection, and we don’t quite agree on how to understand it. But I don’t really want to get into how to *think* about Easter today.

Today, I’m more interested in how the Easter Season challenges our hearts. Ever since I was a child, I’ve found it hard to know exactly how to “feel” at Easter.

Take Christmas: Christmas is a straightforward holiday for a child to understand. It’s a dark time of year, and we celebrate a new light coming into the world. A new baby is safely delivered in a barn, and surrounded by gentle animals. Yes, there is danger and difficulty – but the baby is born, and he and his family make it to safety. It’s uncomplicated, and happy, and hopeful.

Easter is different. It’s mixed and confusing.

This year, I’m sure that many of us had even more mixed feelings about Easter than usual. We did our best to celebrate the day and be joyful – but we couldn’t gather for Easter breakfasts and family dinners. And for many of us, I’m sure it was hard to express joy. We’re concerned for the health of our friends and family. We’re worried about our businesses and our livelihoods. We have fear and anxiety about the whole world – how will we get through this pandemic, and what will the world look like when it’s over?

The Easter story itself is emotionally confusing. Jesus is welcomed into Jerusalem by a cheering crowd, but the same crowd turns on him, violently, a few days later. He's betrayed by one of his friends, and his other followers pretend they don't know him. The disciples expect a big success in Jerusalem – that Jesus will be embraced by the people, that the Romans will be sent home, and the kingdom of God will come. But Jesus is tortured and killed.

Yes, he returns to life and comes back to his friends, but in an unexpected and mysterious way. And then he leaves his friends abruptly only a few weeks after his return. Nothing happens as his followers hoped it would.

Most of the hymns that we love to sing at Easter are loud, triumphant and full-throated in their joy. I don't mean to be irreverent, but they tell the story of Easter as though it's the ending to a blockbuster Hollywood movie. We thought our hero was dead and defeated, but we were wrong. The hymn "Low in the Grave he lay" is a good example. Every Mennonite church I've been a part of sings this hymn on Easter Sunday. The verses describe the apparent defeat and death of Jesus, and the music is sad and somber. But the surprise ending comes in the chorus: "Up from the grave he arose, with a mighty triumph o'er his foes."

Don't get me wrong: I enjoy singing these hymns as much as anyone.

It's just that they don't quite fit the mood of the Easter story as it's presented in the Gospels. The Gospels record that the followers of Jesus were amazed, disbelieving, and often *frightened* at the news of the resurrection. In some versions, the last words of the Gospel of Mark are "they were afraid." That's how Mark ends his Gospel.

John records that on the first Easter – Mary Magdalen recognizes Jesus outside the empty tomb. It seems she wanted to embrace him, but Jesus tells her *not to touch him*. I've never felt the heartache of this story more than this year – when all of us have friends and family we want to hug, but can't.

According to John, later that same day Jesus appears to some of the disciples who are hiding in a locked room. And Thomas still almost can't believe it, even when offered graphic proof.

Or take the story of Jesus appearing to the disciples on the road to Emmaus in the last chapter of Luke. There is no fear, but there is a sort of longing. A heartache. There's something bittersweet about it.

Two disciples are on the road to Emmaus, they're getting out of Jerusalem, which has become a dangerous place. The two are talking through what happened when Jesus was crucified – trying to come to terms with it. And that's when Luke tells us that "Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him."

And so Jesus begins talking to them – interpreting the Scriptures for them. Offering a new perspective on their situation, new understanding, new hope. And just as their spirits are lifting – Jesus walks on ahead of them – as if he’s about to leave.

And here’s the longing, and the heartache: The two disciples say: “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is nearly over.” Please don’t leave us – please stay with us. We don’t want to face the night alone. Jesus stops, but only briefly – only to break bread with them. That’s when they finally recognize Jesus for who he is, and at that moment, Jesus vanishes from their sight. He did not stay with them, as they had wanted.

There is a bittersweet quality to all of these stories about the appearances of Jesus after the resurrection that is hard to put into words.

In her book called “Offering the Gospel to Children”, the Anglican writer Gretchen Wolff Pritchard puts her finger on this point. She writes as follows:

“Any story with a happy ending imparts hope to its hearers. But even the smallest child in the church is likely to sense that the Easter story is not just one story among many – it is *the story* – and so the hope it imparts is our central, crucial, identifying hope.

By that token, Easter’s “happy ending” should be the happiest, most solid, satisfyingly cosmic “happily ever after” anywhere.

But it isn’t. ...Jesus comes back (but) he comes back in a puzzling, mysterious way, and then, shortly afterward, goes away again. The disciples don’t get what they were hoping for. The happy ending... like the risen Lord himself, isn’t where we are looking for it.

...His friends have met him again, not as the friend and teacher they knew and loved, but as a mysterious and unclassifiable human presence, known more surely in the Word of God and the Breaking of the Bread than in the old familiar face, voice, and mannerisms. The clock has not turned back. Rather they (and we) are pushed forward...onto a whole new road.”

These stories about Jesus appearing to the disciples after the resurrection are strangely compelling to me these days. They are strangely relatable to our present situation of pandemic, and lockdown, and waiting.

We’re all living with a new reality we didn’t expect. We’re sheltering behind closed doors. We can’t embrace the people we love. We’re confused about what will happen next. And yet we also have these strange, poignant moments of grace and recognition.

In the Gospels, the disciples are usually the ones that “don’t get it.” The disciples don’t recognize Jesus after the resurrection – at least, the men don’t. And they are slow on the uptake – they don’t understand Jesus’ mission, even after it’s repeatedly explained to them.

Even in our reading from today, at the Ascension, the disciples still don't quite get it. Even as Jesus is getting ready to launch upwards, they ask him – "When will the kingdom come. Can you tell us?"

He tells them to go Jerusalem and wait. To wait for two weeks in social isolation, if you like. To wait for the spirit, for Pentecost, – for something new to happen. Something new to hope for. They still don't get it. They are staring up into the sky long after Jesus leaves them, until some angels finally come and tell them to clear the scene.

But let's give the disciples some credit, they were, at least, thinking about the Kingdom. They were oppressed people in an occupied territory, seeking justice. They hoped Jesus would bring the kingdom of God in the way they imagined it would come – a just kingdom that would overturn the Romans and their collaborators and restore Israel. That was what they longed for. That was their hope.

In contrast with the disciples, I have to be honest and admit that I have not been thinking much about "the kingdom of God" during these days of lockdown. Not as much as I should be, anyway. I'm more likely to be thinking about how great it would be to eat in a restaurant again. How I would like to go to a movie. At work, about how much revenue we've lost this year. How sick and tired I am of video conferences and Zoom meetings. I've been thinking about old comforts more than I care to admit. I have been even more clueless than the disciples.

In the church calendar, the season after Easter is traditionally called "Ordinary Time" How fitting. How many of us are eager to leave the space we're in now, the Easter space – and return to ordinary time – to how things were before.

In fact, the message of Ascension, of Easter, is that ordinary time is over. We're invited onto a new road to a new place, the same road that Jesus walks, and it's a hard one. Jesus calls us to continue his work. It means that we too, face the hard realities of life. That we and everyone we love, experience death, and suffering, and disappointment, and sadness. And the promise Jesus makes on Ascension Day is that we – we, the church, the body of Christ -- can face it the way Jesus did.

To be salt and light for the world. To bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim good news to the poor, and to set the captives free. To express the love that casts out all fear.

If we manage to recognize it, this Easter Season in 2020, might be a gift for us. For us as individuals. For our congregations. And for schools and other institutions of the church. An opportunity to remember who we are. To be renewed in spirit and purpose. To prepare for a new day of Pentecost.

A few years ago, an old friend and mentor of mine named Larry Miller gave me this icon. I worked for Larry a long time ago at Mennonite World Conference.

The original icon dates from somewhere between the 6th and 8th centuries. The Taize Community in France now makes copies of it -- they call it "Jesu et son ami." Jesus and his friend.

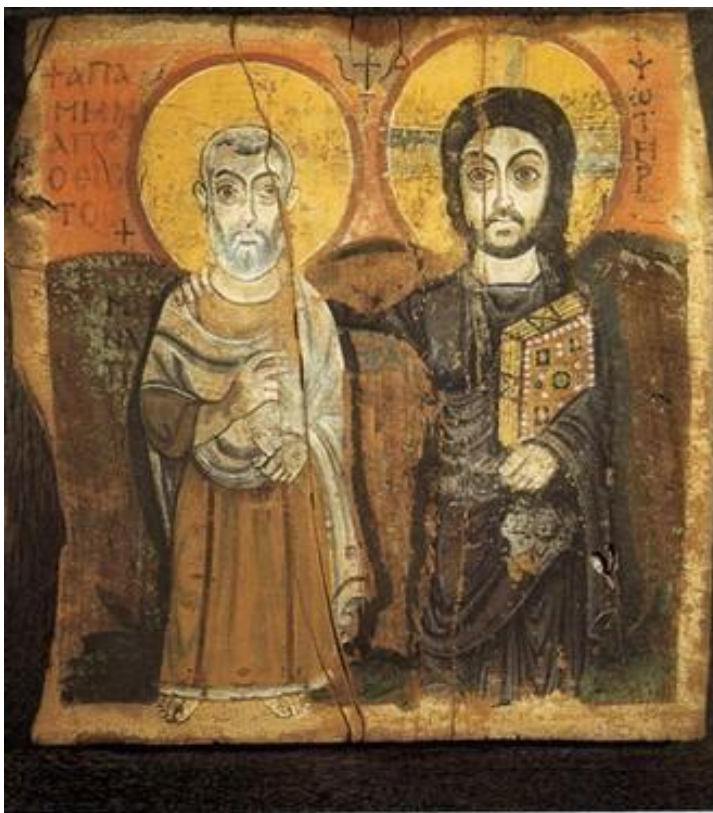
Larry shared a translation of a French commentary on the icon:

"We see two figures on the way: similar height, similar profile, similar radiance. But they are not the same. Nor are they face to face in a relationship that excludes others. They share the same perspective, looking forward, eyes wide open, welcoming us in peace.

Jesus is walking with the believer, his friend. He carries a book of the Gospels, because he is the Word. He rests his arm on the shoulder of his companion, embracing him gently. It is not a gesture that retains, but one that unites and gives responsibility, one that supports and sends forth.

The friend carries a scroll, because he is a witness to the Word. He points to Jesus, astoundingly in a gesture of blessing.... The disciple, the believer, the friend...lifts his hand and blesses the Lord."

Today, and every day, we're invited into this icon. Onto this road, and into the work of being a blessing for this world. In service together with our risen Lord.



Marcus Shantz, May 24, 2020