

The Rev. Dr. Robert MacSwain
Thankful Memorial Episcopal Church
Chattanooga, TN / Diocese of East Tennessee
Seventh Sunday of Easter / 21 May 2023

Acts 1:6-14

Psalm 68:1-10, 32-35

1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11

John 17:1-11

I still vividly remember my first visit to Paris. It was in April 2002, and towards the end of my first day, around 10:00 at night, I went to the Eiffel Tower. It was a lovely, soft spring evening – April in Paris – and the tower was dramatically illuminated by flood-lights. It was quite exciting to travel to the top: you had to take three different elevators to go all the way. And it was much higher than I had imagined. The views of the city at night from the highest observation deck were stunning. They don't call Paris the "City of Lights" for nothing. It was one of the most spectacular things I have ever seen.

This past Thursday the Church observed Ascension Day – the 40th day after Easter and one of the major Feasts of the Christian Year. And while today is thus the Seventh and last Sunday of Easter, the Collect, the reading from Acts, and the Psalm all acknowledge Thursday's commemoration. And I've begun this homily with the story of my visit to the Eiffel Tower because I think that's how many Christians conceive of the Ascension of Christ. After saying farewell to his disciples, Jesus steps into a celestial elevator which takes him all the way back up to heaven. There, like visitors to the Eiffel Tower, he spends his time looking down on all of the rest of us here on Earth. But he looks down on us from a great height, and so is removed and distant from our concerns, no longer walking among us.

And, to be perfectly honest, the first reading from Acts really does suggest that kind of picture, doesn't it? There we read that as the disciples "were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight." And then the two angels appear and say: "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." Apparently the same cloud-elevator that took him up will one day bring him back down.

And on Ascension Day itself the New Testament reading is from the Letter to the Ephesians, where Paul says that God raised Christ

from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

That really does sound like Jesus is enthroned in some heavenly Eiffel Tower.

But notice carefully what Paul says. On one hand, Jesus is “seated at God’s right hand in the heavenly places.” He’s way up there on the highest observation deck of the celestial Eiffel Tower. But on the other hand, and in his very next breath, Paul speaks of “the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.” But if the Church is Jesus’ body, doesn’t that mean that Jesus is – in some sense – still on earth? Because the Church – the Body of Christ – is very much on earth. So how can Jesus be in Heaven when his Body is here on earth?

This is a good example of “paradox.” The dictionary defines ‘paradox’ as a “seemingly contradictory statement that may nonetheless be true.” *A seemingly contradictory statement that may nonetheless be true.* Christianity is full of paradoxes, and this is certainly one of them. God is both One and Three. A virgin gives birth. Jesus is fully God and fully human. His death brings us life. Bread and wine are his body and blood. Jesus has ascended to the Heaven, but the Body of Christ remains on earth. But just because something is paradoxical doesn’t mean that it is silly or stupid. I once heard the late Bishop Jack Spong of the Diocese of Newark give a talk in which he tried to demonstrate that, among other traditional Christian beliefs, the Ascension of Jesus was foolish nonsense. He said presupposed an outdated view of the universe in which heaven is physically located “up” from the earth. Bishop Spong thus tartly observed that if Jesus took off from the earth 2,000 years ago and flew through space at the speed of light, he would not have even cleared our galaxy by now.

But I think this misses the point. The point of the Ascension is not that Jesus is at the top of a celestial Eiffel Tower looking down on humanity, or that he has turned himself into some sort of spaceship. Nor is God's Heaven part of our universe of space and time, such that travelling any distance from earth at any speed will eventually get you there. No, the point of the Ascension is that just as the Risen Christ has entered Heaven, we may also hope to enter Heaven. Christians have been joined to Christ by faith and baptism. This means that what happens to Christ can happen to us. Christ rose from the dead at Easter, and so we also hope for resurrection. But Christ did not simply rise from the dead. He rose from the dead, and then entered Heaven – that is, that perfect community of fellowship with God and all the redeemed.

And so we too can hope for Heaven – for what happened to Christ can happen to us. We too can hope that just as the redeemed humanity of Christ was welcomed into Heaven by God, we may also be welcomed. This theology of the Ascension is expressed in the last verse of Hymn 215, written by Christopher Wordsworth, nephew of the poet:

Thou hast raised our human nature on the clouds to God's right hand:
 There we sit in heavenly places, there with thee in glory stand.
 Jesus reigns, adored by angels; Man with God is on the throne;
 Mighty Lord, in thine ascension, we by faith behold our own.

Meanwhile, we don't just lie around waiting for Heaven – the City of Lights. In our reading from Acts, just before the Ascension, Jesus told his disciples: “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Ascension is the prelude to Pentecost, and Pentecost is the gateway to Christian mission. In other words, while we may hope for Heaven, there is still a lot of work for the Body of Christ to do here on earth, and that work can only be done in the power of the Spirit. So let us pray:

Grant, we pray, Almighty God, that as we believe your only-begotten Son our Lord Jesus Christ to have ascended into heaven, so we may also in heart and mind there ascend, and with him continually dwell; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.