

Kate received a lot of requests for this sermon a few weeks ago. It was given on the final Sunday of Easter 5/13/18, and called “The Heavenly Human Story.” But since then she has renamed it “The Edgy Voice of Christianity.” Use this voice! Let’s use this voice together! We need to cut through the fog of our times! The readings are Ephesians 1:15-23 and Luke 24:44-53.

For the second day in a row on Thursday, a heavy fog surrounded the parsonage. The vibrant daffodils at the bottom of the driveway looked like vague yellow blurs. All the edges and curves of the yard seemed softened and smoothed out as the mist rolled in. But each foggy morning there was one thing that was clear. On Wednesday, the call of the cardinal cut through it all, unmistakably pure and loud! A solo voice, piercing the fog, she proclaimed to the world “I am here! I will not be swallowed up, softened, or smoothed out!” On Thursday, the voice was different. A single robin sang a wild tune. The robin seems such a common bird, but its song is not common at all. Again, just one call, distinct and clear in the out-of-focus morning.

The robin was still singing as I began to write. Was it possibly a hazy morning as Jesus ascended into heaven? And what bird may have been singing from the treetop? Sometimes it helps to put yourself in the scene and imagine the details. **Put flesh on the story**, especially one such as this which confounds human reason. Our focus tends to land on the fantastic, the strange. We ask, “What does it mean that Jesus was ‘carried’ up into heaven?” At House Church we speculated on the mechanics of it all: Was someone pulling him up? Did angels carry him off? Joel shared his experience of artist renditions of the Ascension in which the disciples are looking up and only the **feet** of Jesus visible. I found one of those and have to say the effect is quite comical, all these astonished looking men staring up at a pair of bare feet!

As I found other paintings of this event, I noticed that Mary is given a prominent place in many of them. This surprised me as Jesus’ mother is not in the stories. Actually, there is not much story at all. The end of **Matthew** has no Ascension, but a commissioning of the disciples to go out to teach and baptize. Neither does **John**, which ends with a conversation

between Jesus and Peter. **Mark** simply says “so then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God.” Though I wonder who witnessed that!

You heard **Luke** this morning. Jesus “withdrew from them and was carried up to heaven” while he is blessing the disciples. But curiously in **Acts**, which is written by the same author, there is a discrepancy. Luke’s gospel implies that the Ascension takes place the same day as the resurrection. In Acts, forty days pass with many resurrection appearances before it occurred. This story is not only challenging on the basis of its supernatural aspects, but also due to the fact that there is hardly a common version.

So what do we do with it? As I suggested before, we can start by putting flesh on what we do have. Let us imagine some of the human aspects of the heavenly story. The artists are doing exactly that, I think, when they imagine and then depict Mary being there. For where else would she be? This story is Jesus’ final appearance in the gospels. He is leaving the earthly realm. It is a time of goodbye.

The last few Sundays, we have been hearing Jesus prepare his friends for his leaving. Let’s consider that. What would that goodbye have been like? What is it like to part with someone we have loved? One commentator writes of his conversation with an Amish bishop on the day of the Ascension. He asks if the bishop is going home to celebrate the day. “Oh no,” he says. “We do not celebrate the Ascension. It is a time of mourning for us. Jesus is leaving his friends.” Perhaps mother Mary is included to highlight the human aspect of this divine event...the parting of a mother and son.

But I have never thought of the Ascension as a time of mourning. Neither have I known it as only a story of the supernatural. Did

it happen? Well, something changed...because the resurrection appearances stopped and it was time that the disciples stop looking toward Jesus and start looking outward toward the people. In the Acts story there is a telling line: “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up to the heavens?”

Let’s put flesh on the story. Have you ever had a mentor you loved, who prepared you for your calling, but then came the time when you had to stop relying on him or her and to start listening to the wisdom in your own heart and mind? It doesn’t happen all at once and you may not be sure if you are ready. The Ascension signals the transition, the liminal time between being a student or apprentice and becoming the teacher or the master worker. You can continue to look up at the mentor’s feet, **or** you can get your own feet moving.

It may take a little time. Luke tells us the disciples went straight to worshipping Jesus following the ascension. Is that what our mentors want? Our worship? Is that what Jesus wanted? Sometimes I fear that too many in the church are **stuck** in what was meant to be a transition time, still looking toward or worshipping Jesus instead of finding their own unique voice, using feet, hands and heart to spread the **way** of life Jesus taught, the way of compassion, inclusion, and sacrificial love.

Perhaps it was a mistake when the movement Jesus started was named Christianity, replacing the earlier, more active name – “**The Way.**” Much of the religion became something like a foggy morning – all the rough edges smoothed out with all its complicated verbiage – when its very **edge**, its uncompromising commitment to love and justice, equality and mercy for all people, is what made it stand out in a culture of violence, injustice, inequality, and greed.

Initially, I did not know what the morning birds were trying to teach me. Perhaps it is this. Today we are living in the same opaque fog, unable to see what is right before us as many forces work to obfuscate the truth. Alternate facts, fake news, technology that can put words in anyone’s mouth and alter pictures

to claim the outrageous. Social media used to inflame racial hatred rather than to inform. Multiple autopsies on dead black men to prove a point of view rather than get the truth. Criminals hailed as heroes. Frightened refugees labeled as criminals. Right now, Jesus is not asking for hero worship, but for strong and clear voices to cut through the fog to proclaim **theWay**, the way of compassion, inclusion, and sacrificial love in a world that has lost its way.

Sacrificial love is the love that gives of ourselves to others. It’s the kind that mothers and fathers know every day. But Jesus was clear. The family he was concerned about was **all of humankind**, the family that claims every child as their own, every person as a brother and a sister, every elder as a mother and a father. The Way of Jesus does not know familial, racial, or national boundaries. Remember, he proclaimed as his brothers and sisters, his mother, all of those who did God’s work and spoke up for the marginal, the oppressed, and the poor.

This is the clear, edgy voice we need to raise, and it may cost something. It may cost our comfort, our friends, even our lives. Jesus used this voice when he walked the earth. On this day of Ascension, he bequeaths it to us. We are called, compelled, to use it. Like the birds that sing with abandon before the sun burns off the fog, let our voices ring out pure and clear in the murkiness and the confusion of our time. And let our actions find the way forward. Amen.

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