

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως  
Feast of the Ascension (21 May 2020)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

The Rev. Todd Foster

*Time-stamp: <2020-05-21 Thu 17:33>*

**Collect**

Almighty God, whose blessed Son our Savior Jesus Christ ascended far above all heavens that he might fill all things: Mercifully give us faith to perceive that, according to his promise, he abides with his Church on earth, even to the end of the ages; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.

*Acts 1:1-11, Ephesians 1:15-23, Luke 24:44-53, Psalm 47*

## 1 Ascension Sorrow

The Feast of the Ascension cries out with sorrow. It's the sorrow you feel when you drop off a loved one at the airport for an extended trip, maybe to an international destination. It's the sorrow of a parent leaving their child behind at the dorm as that child begins their freshman year of college. It's the sorrow of saying goodbye to a loved one in the military who is being deployed. It's the sorrow of a grandparent who cannot yet travel to meet a new grandbaby. It's the solemn sorrow of a funeral.

Jesus leads his disciples out to the outskirts of Bethany, itself on the outskirts of greater Jerusalem. Jesus blesses his disciples – wishes them well – and then “withdraws from them.” He's gone.

What tragedy for these disciples! They were a diverse group who didn't seem to belong together anyway: natural enemies whose only commonality was their love of Jesus. And in Jesus they had this leader who claimed the mantle of Messiah, but sure didn't seem interested in being a Messiah like anything *they* had ever imagined! Skulking around in the backwaters of Galilee, healing a person here or there: he didn't seem all that concerned about raising an army, summoning Israel, and driving out the Romans. Instead, the King of Israel was nailed to a Roman cross. All the disciples' hopes were permanently, unquestionably, absolutely crushed.

Until they weren't.

Three days later, Jesus strode into their midst and asked for something to eat. Jesus: their friend, the wonder-worker, the maybe-Messiah, the Crucified: he was alive and well and with them again. The world had been turned upside down, all the rules had been broken, but their friend Jesus was present once more. Who knew what the future held?

And here, finally, they found out exactly what it held. Jesus left them again. Jesus withdrew. And the apostles understood that they would see him no more. Not in the way they had been. Not in the intimacy of a conference in an inner room or an early morning breakfast on the beach.

“he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.”

What were they supposed to do with that?

What they did was “they worshiped him...” “...and [they] returned to Jerusalem with great joy.” “and they were continually in the temple blessing God.”

## 2 Ascension Joy

In the end, it turns out, the disciples *had* been listening to what Jesus had been saying. They understood his message. They accepted that Jesus was a different kind of Messiah than they were expecting. They believed Jesus when he told them that his ascension would be a good thing. They heard his promise of the Holy Spirit, the *paraclete*, the Comforter, who would dwell in them so that they might dwell in Jesus even as Jesus dwelt in the Father. Somehow, being bereft of the physical presence of Jesus would enable them to draw even closer to Jesus, and into the very heart of God.

This trust is *our* inheritance, all these years later. That’s challenging in any time. In the era of Covid-19, it’s extra difficult! We are deprived for a time of one another’s company. We are deprived for a time of our beautiful buildings. We are deprived for a time of the sacraments, of the practices that have nourished us and comforted us for so many years. All of that has been withdrawn from us, even if only temporarily.

But because Jesus ascended into heaven, the Holy Spirit, the *paraclete*, the Comforter, dwells in *us*. In this particular season, it turns out, our calling is not to cling to the physical artifacts that remind us of Jesus, not to cling to buildings and Sacraments. Not to put all our hope in wishful thinking about “getting back to normal.” Instead we are called, invited to *release* all the things that brought us comfort before — and to allow God to approach us in a new way. To take notice of the Holy Spirit at work within us.

Someday, indeed, we will begin to gather together again. But not soon. And not quickly. It could be months or even a year or two until we’re ready to all crowd in together into our little nave again.

In the meantime, I urge you not to let *this* opportunity slip away. God is inviting you to know God in a new way, to pursue God along fresh paths, to develop new habits of prayer and worship, service and fellowship. God is inviting us, St. Thomas’, to *grow in our faith* so that when we do return to meeting together, we will be different. Changed. A people who have deepened our capacity to seek first the Kingdom of God and learned to hold lightly, even to relinquish when the times call for it, those things which are secondary.

We are not victims. We are not suffering anything more than human beings have suffered in the past or will suffer in the future. We are experiencing discomfort, and that discomfort is an invitation, a sign that our loving God is at work among us. This is our time to return with the disciples to Jerusalem, with great joy, and learn to dwell continually in the temple of prayer, blessing God. **Amen.**