

What's Up?-- The Day of Ascension

We've been reveling in the wondrous news of Easter for forty days now, enjoying the annual honeymoon of Christianity and smiling because we know that "Christ is risen," "Christos Anesti, mos def Anesti." The actual forty days were up on Thursday, the Feast of the Ascension, celebrating the time when Jesus was whooshed up in a cloud from Jerusalem after telling the disciples to be patient and wait. How thrilling – how frustrating for them. But wait, isn't this the time when everything is going to be set right? ...Master? ...my Lord and my God?

If you go to Jerusalem, you can pay to go into a church where there is a rock with indentations in it from the massive heat coming out of Jesus' feet when he blasted off for heaven. No kidding. And I hope to get there someday, because it is a great story, don't need Chuck Heston to tell us it's the greatest story ever told. But really, dents in the rock from super hot feet?

We talked about this last week, how sophisticated we've become – skeptical even – about special effects and the cosmic geography of heaven. There's no such address, we've been up there and looked. So where oh where did Jesus go? Talking about peace, the peace of God that surpasses our understanding, we also heard a formula: love plus good humor equals peace. You can't beat this part of the story: When the disciples are all standing there looking up in the sky. If you live in New York, you get used to it. Anytime someone stands on the street corner looking up, before long somebody else will be looking up too. Plenty of folks just hustle past, determined to go about their business, but the curious gather and look up. And if there's anything God wants, it's for us to be curious.

So there are the disciples all looking up, and a couple of strangers come along and join them. One nudges a disciple in the ribs, “Hey, what are we looking at?” The strangers are wearing white robes, so we know they’re important – angels, Luke has decided. So they nudge the uplookers in the ribs, “What are you looking at?” But without waiting for an answer (angels being angels, after all, they already know all the answers) without waiting for an answer, they crack wise: “Don’t worry about Jesus, he’ll come back in just the same way he left.”

Well that’s a big help... What are we supposed to do? Forty days of excitement about the resurrection of Jesus from his tomb and now this: “Don’t worry, he’ll be back?” Forty of course is the symbolic period for processing things in the Bible. Just as it took forty days (and nights) of rain to purge the world of sin when God tried flooding everything. Bad choice; didn’t work; apology accepted. It took the Israelites forty years of wandering in the wilderness to get used to the idea that liberation from slavery and oppression are a free gift, but the gift is only as strong as our gratitude for it and our willingness to pass it along. And it took forty days for Jesus to process his identity as the Son of God once he was baptized – tempted by Satan yet unsinning. And now it’s been forty days for the disciples, and us to mourn the loss of Jesus and revel in the wondrous news of his reappearance.

Inevitably the forty days end and we have to let go. Notice the Day of Ascension is always Thursday, so we don’t even have to face it head-on on the Sabbath unless we want to. But face it we must, and the humor helps. “Don’t worry folks, he’ll be back, just the same way he left.” How often do we tell each other, when a loved one dies, “We’ll be together again one day,” or, “She’s gone to be with her loved ones again?”

Lo he went – and lo he'll come back with clouds descending. But meanwhile, as Sam Cooke sang, we “...got to work right here. That's the sound of the men working on the chain gang.” And let us give thanks to God that we're not on one, not exactly. Meanwhile, it's time to get back to the business of living. We know our redeemer lives and will come again, but meanwhile we have to live, we have to act. That's what the book of Acts is all about. The strategy, the agenda, the theme of Acts is to move us from the wondrous story of the incarnation and ministry and teaching of God's very self among us, into the life we live, propelled by the Spirit. That's the part we have in us, the stuff we're made of, our soul food.

It means tending to our relationships, with friends and loved ones and strangers too. With those we help from afar and those we struggle to love nearby. God has withdrawn physically, back into God's self. No longer present in the flesh, but very much present in spirit. God's chosen act of incarnation is completed, but the effect is meant to be permanent. The physical life of Jesus came to an end, just as ours will after four or five score. The physical life came to an end and was transformed, even as we shall be.

God's self has gone back to its original nature – the cosmic completeness of all matter and being -- after making it clear to us that we are indeed, each one of us, parts of this whole. But while we are here, in history, just as God, in the person of Jesus was here, in human history, we are meant to act. We are meant to teach one another, care for Creation, heal one another and nurture the planet as long as we shall live. There'll be plenty of time for loafing 'round the throne later; but meanwhile, we got to work right here. The great seminar is ending and it's time to start providing for our family.