

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

May 16, 2021 – ASCENSION SUNDAY (YR. B)

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Homily: “*A Triptych of Triumphant Truth*”

Acts 1:1-11 (A prophecy that Jesus will be taken up into Heaven)
Psalm 47 (Rejoice! God reigns!)
Ephesians 1:15-23 (The Risen Christ is Head of the Church)
St. Luke 24:44-53 (The Ascension of Our Lord Jesus Christ)

Except for our Amish and Mennonite neighbors, the Feast of the Ascension of Our Lord Jesus Christ tends to be a forgotten day throughout much of the Christian world. Many parishes hold no Ascension Day service. I suppose their attitude is, “We know Jesus returned to heaven, so why go to church to commemorate that day?” But what if we looked at Easter that way: “Oh, we believe Christ was raised from the dead, so why have a worship service to celebrate that occasion?” What has been forgotten is that the Ascension is the all-important “hinge” connecting the powerful mystery of the Resurrection that brings new life, to God’s empowerment of His people through the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Think of the story as a triptych, a work of art divided into three panels hinged together, which can be folded up and made portable for easy transport. Here, I have a tiny little triptych as an example. Typically, as with this one, the middle panel is the largest, and it’s flanked by two smaller panels with related themes. Taken together, the three panels tell one story.¹

The word *triptych* originates from the Greek *tri* (for *three*) plus *ptche* (meaning, *fold*). Triptychs come in a variety of sizes, from pocket ones like this to immense altar pieces. Some churches’ stained glass panels also imitate the trifold form. The Lectionary texts for Ascension form a triptych. I like that metaphor because it conveys that our Scripture lessons are related, and their message can be folded up and made portable for carrying wherever we go.

Like a medieval triptych, this story needs all three panels to be complete. The first we’ll call “Recognition,” because in this panel, the disciples recognize the Risen Lord. The second we’ll title “Commissioning,” because here the risen Christ commissions His disciples to do His work in the world. And the third we’ll label “Departure,” because in the largest panel, God the Son departs into heaven, to resume His place with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit—together the Holy Trinity, One God.

The first panel, Recognition: How good are your recognition skills? If Jesus’ New Testament followers had access to our 21st-century voice print and facial recognition software, DNA analysis or fingerprint technology, they would not have mistaken Jesus for someone else. In John’s gospel, Mary mistakes the risen Jesus for the gardener (Jn. 20:15). Later that Easter day, two disciples on the road to Emmaus mistake Jesus, their traveling companion, for a vagabond who hasn’t heard about the local tragedy (Lk. 24:18).

And, just before today’s Gospel verses, we read that when the risen Christ stands among His disciples, they are “startled and terrified,” mistaking Him for a ghost (Lk. 24:37). Gardener, vagabond, ghost—none of these even comes close to the identity of our risen, glorified Lord. But each of these to whom Christ showed Himself recognizes Him truly when Jesus calls Mary by name (Jn. 20:16); breaks bread with the Emmaus travelers (Lk. 24:30); and shows His scars to, and eats fish with, His disciples (Lk 24:36-43).

In all three of these encounters, Jesus opens their minds to understand the Scriptures that connect the Messiah’s suffering, death, and resurrection, such that they recognize Him as the One promised from God who would save them. Such a recognition sets their hearts on fire to share the message that God’s love is stronger than death.

John Wesley once described the effects of a woman testifying in a prayer meeting on behalf of her faith. He recorded that as she spoke, “a fire kindled and ran, as flame among the stubble, through [the] hearts of almost all that heard.”² That same fire will be kindled in the disciples at Pentecost, 50 days after Easter—and if we are open to it, it will be set aflame in us, as well.

The second panel, Commissioning: Now that they know Christ is truly risen and present with them, Jesus appoints the disciples to be His witnesses. They have seen His death and can testify to His resurrection. Therefore, they are to spread the good news of repentance and forgiveness of sins to all the nations, beginning right in their own community (Lk. 24:47). So that they can do this effectively, Jesus imparts to them His own power. He is not asking them to be “flame among the stubble” on their own, but with the equipping and empowerment of the Holy Spirit.³

And oh, *what a difference that made!* Just read the Acts of the Apostles—which perhaps ought to be re-titled, “the Book of Miracles worked through the Apostles by the power of the Holy Spirit.” None of this would have been possible without Jesus’ return into heaven. And so we come to:

The third panel, Departure: Our Gospel lesson’s account of Jesus’ Ascension (Lk. 24:50–51) is not a different event from that recorded in Acts, chapter 1. It is simply a shorter version. But Jesus’ Ascension is so significant for St. Luke that he makes our Lord’s return into heaven both the climax of his gospel and the opening of the Book of Acts. In the gospel version, the emphasis is on Jesus’ priestly action in blessing the disciples, and on their response that follows, of worship and praise to God in the Temple.⁴

Matthew does not explicitly mention Jesus’ ascension. John doesn’t narrate the actual event, but gives hints. In John 20:17, Jesus tells Mary not to hold onto him, because He has “not yet ascended to the Father.” However, St. Luke intends for us to see in Jesus’ departure parallels to the great prophets Moses and Elijah, whom Jesus both follows and surpasses. We see this in St. Luke’s account of the Transfiguration, as well [9:31].

With His Ascension, Jesus is now completing the “exodus” of His suffering, death and resurrection by being carried up into heaven, as Elijah was. And as Elijah did, Christ blesses those who remain behind, arranging for them to receive a measure of the Divine Spirit (see 2 Kings 2:1-18).

The Rev. Dr. Alyce McKenzie, Professor of Preaching at Perkins School of Theology, reflects on a stained glass window in the form of a triptych on the back wall of the church she attended as a small child. The left-hand panel showed Jesus in Gethsemane, His face earnest as He prayed, a blood-red tear glittering on His cheek. The right-hand panel depicted Jesus on the cross, His face anguished, His body wracked with suffering. In the middle panel was Jesus ascending, His face serene, His feet gracing a cloud at least a foot off the ground.

Alyce writes, “I sat there as a child wondering, ‘Why isn’t he wearing sneakers?’ and ‘How can he hover over the ground like that?’ But the most pressing question was, ‘Why can’t that peaceful man help those other two men who are in trouble?’” Her mother answered: “Honey, they’re all the same man.” “Well,” says Alyce, “That really cleared things up for a four-year-old!”

Alyce’s mother was right. Here on the brink of His departure, it finally dawns on the disciples *who* it is that stands before them. The same Jesus who was the Suffering Servant is the Savior of the World. The same Jesus who was mocked and tortured is now Judge of both the living and the dead.

The same Jesus who rose from the grave and is ascending into Heaven is He who will return as the Holy Spirit. At that time, He will fill all who recognize, and are commissioned by Jesus with power to live as He commands, and to witness to His love and mercy throughout the world.

I don’t know about you, but with my acute awareness of my *own* weaknesses and limitations, my own powerlessness and inability to control much of anything, I’d really appreciate an outpouring of God’s Holy Spirit on my life, both to jump-start my faith afresh, and to strengthen and guide me through the nearly incomprehensible world and times in which we are living. So, I can’t wait for the Day of Pentecost to come. What about you? Will we be obedient to Jesus’ command to wait around, praying, until He gives us His Holy Spirit? *Maranatha*, come, Lord Jesus! *Amen*.

¹ Adapt. Alyce M. McKenzie, “We Will Never Be Without Him: Reflections on Jesus’ Ascension,” 29 May 2011, [Patheos.com](http://www.patheos.com/Additional-Resources/We-Will-Never-Be-Without-Him-Alyce-McKenzie-05-30-2011.html) <<http://www.patheos.com/Additional-Resources/We-Will-Never-Be-Without-Him-Alyce-McKenzie-05-30-2011.html>> 15 May 2012.

² Adapt. Paul Wesley Chilcote, *She Offered Them Christ*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993) p. 53.

³ See Joel 2:28f; Is. 32:15, 44:3; and Ezek. 39:29; see also Lk. 12:12; Mt. 10:20; and Jn. 14:16f.

⁴ Adapt. I. Howard Marshall, *New International Greek Testament Commentary on Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), p. 907.