

Ascension Amplified

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The Rev. Amanda Gerken-Nelson

When I first moved to Maine, some friends of ours hosted a Passover-Easter gathering to honor the Jewish and Christian traditions of their respective families of origin.

Before eating, one of our friends described the history of Passover and the beliefs, rituals, and traditions of their Jewish faith surrounding the holiday

As the resident Christian clergy person in attendance that afternoon, I was asked to explain Easter.

When I got to the part of Jesus's ascension to heaven 40 days later, every Christian in the room responded "Wait, what? We believe that?"

Though many of them had spoken the words in the creeds for their whole lives, the ascension is not typically something that is talked about or preached on

So, when Christina asked if we were going to celebrate Ascension Day today I jumped at the opportunity to do so

The Christian Church of the 20th and 21st Centuries has made a big deal about Jesus' birth – Christmas – death – Good Friday – and Resurrection – Easter

But, I can't say we talk all that often about how Jesus then left earth after his resurrection

If anything, I think we couple resurrection and ascension without realizing it

It's like Jesus rises from the grave and just keeps right on going to heaven

But in the scriptures we hear that in after rising from the dead Jesus hung around for a while

Remember the stories of the disciples hanging out in locked rooms and Jesus appearing to them and showing them his wounds?

Remember the story of the disciples walking to Emmaus and how Jesus walked alongside them and they recognized him only as he broke bread with them?

Jesus hung around for a while – his ministry of love and teaching the way of compassion continued even after his death

Until today – well, until this past Thursday – 40 days after his resurrection, Jesus ascends to heaven

Much like the great prophets before him: Moses who, although his death is mentioned in the book of Deuteronomy but because there is no grave where he is buried, myths were created that his death was actually an ascension to heaven. And then, of course, Elijah in 2 Kings, who is taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire

Much like these great prophets before him, Jesus ascends to heaven after his resurrection

“While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven” Luke writes in his gospel

and then, “as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight” Luke writes in Acts

Jesus ascended into heaven

Game.Changer.

The disciples thought Jesus was gone when he died on the cross, but he came back

But now?

Now he's gone for reals

What now?

Who will take up Jesus' ministry of love and teaching the way of compassion now?

You! Us!

"You are witnesses of these things" Jesus says to his disciples in Luke's gospel

And, "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" Jesus says in Luke's account of the ascension in Acts.

The disciples – you – us! It's now our turn

Ascension Day is truly the birthday of the church

Debra Dean Murphy, assistant professor of religious studies at West Virginia Wesleyan College writes "Jesus' ascension into heaven...is not "beam me up, Scotty" science fiction, but rather that which makes possible the Church's existence. Because Jesus is not *here*, the Church *can* be, *must* be—the Church is constituted as and empowered to be [Jesus'] worshiping, witnessing body here and now."¹

¹ <https://debradeanmurphy.wordpress.com/2010/05/10/ascension-politics/>

Jesus' ascension is the disciples' promotion

The disciples' promotion is our constitution, our trust, our charge

Jesus gave the ministry on earth to the care of his disciples, to us

It is now our gift, our mission, our offering

And as the weight of that realization rests upon you let us also recall that Jesus has promised help in this mission: The Holy Spirit

But before we get there – which, spoiler alert, is Pentecost next week – let us ponder for a moment just what is being asked of us

What does ministry look like if our great teacher, the Messiah, is not here to guide us?

The book of Acts goes on to tell us how the first disciples, went out and shared the ministry of Jesus – they healed, they preached, they continued to eat with questionable company

Greg Carey, Professor of New Testament at Lancaster Theological Seminary, Lancaster, Pa.

writes in his reflection on this event that “In all these ways the disciples do not simply mimic Jesus' ministry, but amplify it through the power of the Spirit.”²

The disciples amplify Jesus' ministry, not mimic – amplify through the power of the Spirit

The ministry is God's, it's Jesus' – our calling is to amplify it: give it voice, give it bodies

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ascension-of-our-lord/commentary-on-luke-2444-53-9>

So what does that look like for us?

I was in seminary during the Occupy Wall St. demonstrations which had a large response in Oakland, CA near my seminary in Berkeley – it was called Occupy Oakland

One of the tools of the occupy protesters in both New York and Oakland was a practice known as “human microphone” or, as I experienced it, “mic check”

If you google “human microphone” you’ll see Wikipedia’s description which says: “A human microphone, also known as the people's microphone, is a means for delivering a speech to a large group of people, wherein persons gathered around the speaker repeat what the speaker says, thus "amplifying" the voice of the speaker without the need for amplification equipment.”³

It worked like this – the speaker, who was at the center of the crowd would say “mic check” and then going out into the crowd in concentric circles people would repeat what the speaker said – almost like an echo

So, like this “mic check – my name is Amanda – I am a follower of Jesus – God is love”

And in a few short moments, my story, my words, are shared like a ripple in the waters of the gathered community

My words amplified through the telling and retelling of the words – through the hearing and rehearing of their cadence – in the witness and the re-witness of the new layers of people

I imagine us here at St. Bart’s something like that community at Occupy Wall St – the politics and specificity of the movement aside for now

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_microphone

But a movement of people energized, activated, and motivated to amplify a voice, a message echoing out into our communities

waves of meaning rolling over us and continuing to roll through us through our own witness and momentum

Jesus ascended into heaven and the disciples took on the task of amplifying the ministry their friend started

And like ripples through time, that movement has found its way to us where we, too, have been awash in its wonder and it's now our turn to amplify that message again and again

The church has taken on so many new layers since our teacher left: layers of ritual and tradition, meaning and interpretation and we need to be the first to admit that not all of it has been good: as our Bishop reminded us a few weeks ago some of the ripples in the movement have been waves of colonization and imperialism, fear and hurt washed over populations of people because of their race, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, and ability

Things our teacher, Jesus, never talked about or practiced

Our mission, truly, is to amplify what Jesus first taught us, first showed us – his love, his mercy, his forgiveness – and we need to let it roll out through us into our communities and into our world through our witness

And we need to repent the harm done by our hands – whether ours or the hands of our faith forebears – so that the true ministry of Jesus might be amplified through us

Professor Carey writes: “Jesus’ ascension does not take him into some remote heavenly dwelling, hopefully to be discovered by the Webb Telescope. According to Luke, Jesus’ ascension fills the church with life

and allows his ministry to flourish in ways it could not when restricted to one embodied individual.”

Today we celebrate Ascension Day and give time and attention to that brief line in our creeds that many of us may never have really given much thought to

It is because of that line – “he ascended into heaven” – that we are gathered together here – it is because Jesus ascended that the church has its purpose: to amplify the ministry Jesus started oh so many years ago

So: “Mic check – let justice reign – let love be our message – God be with you – Amen.”