

## **Seventh Sunday of Easter** May 13

Most of us will not celebrate Ascension Day with a special service. Some of us will, and if you are not you might just think about heading out to an Ascension Day service, if for nothing else for the really excellent hymns. And if that is not feasible, consider opening your service with one of those great Ascension hymns.

Ascension is a theme we lose at our peril. Our readings today reflect an attempt by the editors of the pericope system to make sure that we retain its necessary themes. We will not hear the Ascension story this on the seventh Sunday of Easter, but the words of Acts which immediately follow that story are heard and they really don't make sense unless you are remembering those disciples gazing up into the sky looking for Jesus. The collect will help us. It makes sure that ascension is not too far away.

As I alluded to in the first paragraph, I believe you want to do something with this. A worship planner might note the ascension with a brief rite at the beginning of the Sunday service in which you acknowledge the passage of the 40<sup>th</sup> day, read the first verses of Acts or the concluding words of Acts. Some traditions extinguish the paschal candle, but I think that sends exactly the wrong message. I would move it. If you have had it by the altar for the Easter season, read the ascension story and move it back to the baptismal font where it normally stands. Jesus has not left, but now we see him sacramentally, in water, word, bread, wine, people, etc.

We thought that the worship leader might weave the Ascension into the rite of confession. Confession does not only need to say that I am naughty. I can also confess that I am afraid, I am alone, I don't understand, or I am anxious. Jesus' ascension reminds us that we gaze up into heaven and wonder when that day of his return will happen.

The absolution in this would be the promise of Jesus. He did not leave us, not really. The Spirit poured out has connected us to Christ. Matthew's last words are a promise that we always have the promise of Christ. John 14 tells us that Jesus is not leaving us as orphans.

The final element then could be one of the wonderful ascension hymns which are found in the hymnal in the place of the hymn of praise. From there into the Collect for the Sunday after Easter.

Here is the collect and propers for the day of ascension that might also be worked into this:

### **Ascension Day** May 14

Almighty God, as Your only-begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, ascended into the heavens, so may we also ascend in heart and mind and continually dwell there with Him, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Acts 1:1-11

Psalm 47

Ephesians 1:15-23

Luke 24:44-53

But why do we mark this fortieth day? I am so glad you asked. Ascension might seem like an unlikely thing to celebrate and for most of our folks it surely does seem like an odd holiday. Celebrating the absence of Jesus, His departure? But that is exactly what Ascension does not say. The point of Luke's portrayal of the Ascension is to say that he did not leave, but his presence changed. We do not celebrate the absence of Jesus, but the real presence of the living Lord Jesus. He ascends to take his rightful throne, but he does not leave us as orphans (John 14) and he does not ever take his presence from us. (Matthew 28)

Just look at the disciples who watched Jesus ascend into that cloud. In the ensuing chapters of Acts they heal the lame, cast out demons, get persecuted by the Sanhedrin, raise the dead, and when they die in a hail of stones, on their lips are the very words of Jesus, "forgive them..." and "Into your hands I commend my spirit." Jesus has not left, but his face is now seen in the faces of his beloved disciples. His hands are still healing through their hands, his love is still expressed, and his voice still rings out with authority, remember the story of Ananias and Saphira? Sounds like Jesus and the fig tree doesn't it. Jesus had said that we would do more than he did. Now He is still healing and helping, feeding and forgiving. He feeds far more hungry men and women this morning through his people than he ever did when the crowds thronged to his side in Galilee.

Of course that means we see our own words and deeds a little differently, doesn't it. We are no longer ourselves, but we are also Jesus' people, the instruments through which he speaks, through which he acts, through which his kingdom comes to this time and place.

That is the essential message of the Ascension which we forget at our peril. Luke forces us to deal with the presence of Christ; he won't let us fudge on it. He confronts us with it and we have to have an answer when we read that text. Of course, this also requires faith on our part. But can you imagine what it would have been like if Jesus had not done this. What if there really was a two thousand year old formerly crucified guy walking around in plain sight? We would have long made a circus of that. He would have been Oprah or some reality TV show. This way he is here and you either believe it or you don't.

This Sunday is the festival of the Now/Not Yet. We might want to preach this tension today. But the real question is why? Why would we want to say something that is hard to understand? Should we not stick to the calm waters and fresh green grass of the understandable? This is a diet of kale and collard greens. It might be bitter. But with a little proper preparation it could be a delicacy.

But there is a good reason to preach this. Out of this tension comes the very energy of ministry and evangelism. If a rubber band is not stretched, it has no energy in it. We walk into a room. It

does not look like Jesus is there, but he has promised to be in that room with us. We must trust that. If it is a room filled with tension or fear or anger, what does it mean to me that I am not alone? What does it mean if I am there to deal with a serious sin? If I believe Jesus is right there with me, can I really be afraid of them? If Jesus is right there, do I not have confidence to speak? If he has promised to make my words effective by his Spirit, can I really remain silent?

But if I think he is up in heaven...what then? I will not be bold and fearless. At least I will not be as bold or as fearless. If you want to read a very disturbing book, consider *The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* by Christian Smith and Melina Lundquist Denton (Oxford, 2009 reprint). This text has sparked an entire cottage industry of analysis. It coined the term Moralistic Therapeutic Deism to describe the spirituality of many teens. They don't believe that Jesus is here. He is far away in their minds.

This strange presence of Christ which often feels like an absence is important. What if Jesus could be seen? Would anyone listen to me? Would I even get invited into that lion's den of a room filled with angry or fearsome people? Probably not. The hidden-ness of Jesus often makes ministry possible. The presence of Jesus makes ministry powerful. On the last day no one will confess their sins with tears looking for forgiveness from me, even if I have it to offer.

Perhaps we need to wind up a balsa wood airplane with a rubber band prop. It won't fly without the tension on the rubber band. We need the now and the not yet of this text and this day. It is uncomfortable, but it is really necessary.

### **Collect of the Day**

O King of glory, Lord of Hosts, uplifted in triumph far above all heavens, leave us not without consolation but send us the Spirit of truth whom You promised from the Father; for You live and reign with Him and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

*Does anyone use the word "consolation" outside of the loser bracket of a basketball tournament? Do our people need consolation? The Pew Research Foundation came out with a study that suggests that America is decreasingly "Christian." Here is one report you can see if you have not already: <http://www.cnn.com/2015/05/12/living/pew-religion-study/index.html>*

*The implication of the article is that Christianity is dying. But is that so? Is the threat not more to the institutional church which may be exactly what Jesus had in mind. These "nones" are often quite interested in Jesus and are volunteering to serve people in greater numbers than the folks in pews. Jesus said "by their fruit you will know them." And "the one who does my commandments is my brother." Do we need to rethink what is the Church? Can Lutherans do that?*

*This seventh Sunday of Easter always falls in those ten strange days between the Ascension and the Pentecost. This Sunday almost functions as a miniature "Lent" or "Advent" for the feast of Pentecost. As Advent reminds us of the prophetic waiting of God's Old Testament people and as*

*Lent reminds us of our sin and our need for the paschal lamb, this Sunday reminds us that we need the Holy Spirit to bring Jesus to us.*

*Here we remember the reality that we cannot touch Jesus, but we need him, we long for his presence, a longing which has been fulfilled with Pentecost's fire. Jesus is the king of glory and the Lord of hosts ("Sabbaoth" as the old Sanctus used to sing it.) He is uplifted in triumph. Read Paul's second chapter of Philippians to see this, or Peter's first epistle or Paul's letter to the Colossians to see how the early church would have sung about this. The ascension is also the celebration of the fact that Jesus does sit on heaven's highest throne, at the very right hand of God. There he wields all the divine power.*

*We beg him not to leave us without consolation, but to send us the Spirit of truth whom he has promised. I have long thought that we take the presence of Christ for granted. We don't appreciate just how much good Christ has done in this world through his body the Church. We think that we are pretty self sufficient and could manage rather well without that presence. But I think of how brutal the Roman Empire really was. I remember that in the world in which Jesus lived the peasant stock from which my family came in Germany would have meant that I would have been born a slave at best. How my life would have been different in that situation. The fact that we have debates today about capital punishment, abortion, human rights, education of all children, or the plight of the poor, is in large part due to the presence of Christ in this culture. Even if the culture of death sometimes wins those debates and passes horrible laws, that there are some people who think this is bad is also a sign of the presence of Christ.*

*That presence of Christ is mediated today through the work of the Holy Spirit. He connects us to the one who sits on the throne of heaven, so that I am given a personal and abiding relationship with Him. Because the one who sits on that throne is the Lord of hosts and the King of glory, he is able to enter into that meaningful and beautiful relationship with every human being. Though nearly two billion people have been touched today by the waters of Baptism, though that number grows by thousands and thousands today, he has time for me, time to listen to this prayer and answer it and all the prayers of my heart and lips.*

## **Readings**

Acts 1:12-26

<sup>12</sup> Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away.<sup>13</sup> And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James. <sup>14</sup> All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.

<sup>15</sup> In those days Peter stood up among the brothers (the company of persons was in all about 120) and said, <sup>16</sup> “Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus. <sup>17</sup> For he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.”<sup>18</sup> (Now this man acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness, and falling headlong he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out. <sup>19</sup> And it became known to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their own language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) <sup>20</sup> “For it is written in the Book of Psalms,

“‘May his camp become desolate,  
and let there be no one to dwell in it’;

and

“‘Let another take his office.’

<sup>21</sup> So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, <sup>22</sup> beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection.” <sup>23</sup> And they put forward two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also called Justus, and Matthias. <sup>24</sup> And they prayed and said, “You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen <sup>25</sup> to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.” <sup>26</sup> And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias, and he was numbered with the eleven apostles.

*Is the Gospel of this whole story really the fact that Peter puts all this in God’s hands? Do we, who are struggling in our parishes and see a church that is struggling all around us really find the good news in the prayer which Peter prays. It was all in God’s hands. God oversupplies their needs.*

*We only have this story of what happened between Ascension and Pentecost, so we get it every year. I read a really interesting book by Richard Bauckham called “Jesus and the Eyewitnesses” which he bases, at least in the first part, on a study of names in ancient Palestine. What he believes is that the names of the apostles are very important. The names are distinctly Palestinian. You might be unaware but there are of course a number of scholars of the more critical schools who have said that the lists of the twelve Apostles are unreliable and probably the fabrication of the later Christian communities. Bauckham rather convincingly points out that Jews outside of Palestine did not use the same names as Palestinian Jews did. The list of names here is a very Palestinian list.*

*Bauckham wants to make this point because he wants to draw attention to the role the disciples played as witnesses. He says that they appear to have been the authoritative witnesses for the early church. That might seem obvious to you but it needed to be said because for the last 200 years or so of NT scholarship that reality has been pretty well ignored. As one guy said, it is as if*

*they told their story once and then ascended into heaven after Jesus. Every year in my NT class I talk about the nature of the Gospels and someone trots out the old canard that these are unreliable because they are passed along through oral transmission. They always cite the fact that we all have played the “telephone” game where we pass a phrase around a large circle and it comes out sounding very different on the other end. Of course the point of the game is that the first person is right there to tell you what he or she initially said. If the Gospel stories really were passed around orally before they were written down, the problem with the critical assertion of unreliability is that there were still eye witnesses alive who would have corrected these accounts. As usual, the critics seem to have a very difficult time with a real eye witness asserting a real resurrection. Thus NT scholarship continues to be distorted in many of the commentaries we read.*

*The truth is that these apostles would have lived for some time. We know that Peter lived into the sixth decade of the first century and there is strong tradition that John lived into the last decade of that century. Papias talks about two witnesses who were still active in the nineties. What I find really interesting is that when Peter stands up and proposes that they replace Judas, they are able to find two guys who meet the rather difficult requirements which Peter laid out. These two were never mentioned until now in the Gospels, and neither of them will ever show up again.*

*I find the same issue when I read the Letter to the Hebrews. Here is a first century book, not by Paul, but written by the theological equal of Paul. And we don't even know the guy's name! What resources does God keep up his sleeve of which we are completely unaware? What is floating out there which we cannot see, do not know, but which God has waiting in the wings just for us? I am reminded of my first parish when in three months we lost the chairmen of the parish and elders, and another prominent family to relocations. In a parish with only 40 folks in church on a Sunday, that was huge, especially since they were big financial supporters.*

*But God had other folks, younger folks, who had just as many resources and skills. The reality was that until these older folks stepped out of the way these younger folk would not step up to the plate. As it happened, however, I could only see that my friends and support were being taken away. I did not see the resources that God had under me at the time. It was a tough couple of months but I remember very distinctly being reminded of “by grace you have been saved...” and realizing that it was by His grace that this would work. If you meet me in Bountiful sometime, I can point to the very manhole cover between my office and the parsonage, in the middle of the street, on which I was stepping as that familiar but newly precious message hit me like a ton of bricks.*

*Peter wants them to elect another witness. Why? It appears that in the ancient world twelve witnesses carried a particular legal weight. This is why we still have 12 jurors on a capital criminal case. It was commonly held that if twelve witnesses attested to a crime one could skip the trial and move straight to the sentencing phase. The judge won't sentence until the twelve*

*peers have examined the evidence and come to the conclusion that it really happened. If even one of those jurors dissents, it is a hung jury. No verdict.*

*Peter only sees eleven who are charged with standing up to bear that witness. There should be a twelfth, so he proposes that another witness be set aside. The lot falls to Matthias, who then promptly drops out of the picture along with most of the other witnesses, never to be heard from again. Only Peter, John, and James (briefly) will show up in the record. Most of the attention of Acts and the epistolary record is dedicated to Paul. I have read one commentator who said that Peter jumped the gun here. God had Paul in mind. I am not so sure of that one.*

*If you want to read a really strange story which has Matthias as a character, think about Philip Jose Farmer's "Jesus on Mars." Farmer is a really odd fellow, but he is fascinated by the mystery of faith, even though he does not share the faith with us. He proposes a whole Christian culture on Mars, which involves aliens, who heard the witness of Matthias and believed. Of course it helped that Jesus has been living with them for the last 2000 years. (Rather puts a new spin on the Ascension too!) The book is interestingly set in the years 2012-2014. It also involves a mars rover which is quite like what we have been watching for the past few years there.*

## Psalm 1

Blessed is the man

who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,  
nor stands in the way of sinners,  
nor sits in the seat of scoffers;  
<sup>2</sup>but his delight is in the law of the LORD,  
and on his law he meditates day and night.

<sup>3</sup>He is like a tree

planted by streams of water  
that yields its fruit in its season,  
and its leaf does not wither.

In all that he does, he prospers.

<sup>4</sup>The wicked are not so,  
but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

<sup>5</sup>Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,  
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;

<sup>6</sup>for the LORD knows the way of the righteous,  
but the way of the wicked will perish.

*One of my colleagues at CU, an emeritus who focused on the Psalms, contends that this Psalm along with Psalm 2, the only Psalms without superscriptions, are actually intended as the overviews/introductions to the whole Psalter. It is an interesting idea.*

*This brief Psalm also makes for a great study in parallelism, the one structure of Hebrew poetry which we find at all accessible. I am especially intrigued by what I find in the last verse. The first five verses have contrasted the sinner and the righteous man. The sinner is temporary, he will not stand in the congregation of the righteous. The righteous man is durable, like an oak whose roots are constantly watered.*

*But then, in the last verse, it is not the righteous who live and the sinners who die, but it is the way of the righteous man which is known by God and the way of the sinner which perishes. A word of grace for the sinner himself? If you read Romans 7 and realize that we are both sinner and saint, that might just be what you hear in this. The sinner's way perishes, but not the sinner himself. The way of the saint, the man whom God has raised from the waters of baptism, that man's way is known and precious to God. But your sinful ways, they perish. But you, you yourself, continue.*

*Does it have legs to preach?*

*I John 5:9-15 This follows up on last Sunday's text but I have included the verses immediately before and those which follow. This is the last chapter of I John, so I thought important to bring you to the very end of it.*

*<sup>6</sup>This is he who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not by the water only but by the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. <sup>7</sup>For there are three that testify: <sup>8</sup>the Spirit and the water and the blood; and these three agree. <sup>9</sup>If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater, for this is the testimony of God that he has borne concerning his Son. <sup>10</sup>Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself. Whoever does not believe God has made him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has borne concerning his Son. <sup>11</sup>And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. <sup>12</sup>Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.*

*<sup>13</sup>I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life. <sup>14</sup>And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. <sup>15</sup>And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.*

*<sup>16</sup>If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God will give him life—to those who commit sins that do not lead to death. There is sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that. <sup>17</sup>All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that does not lead to death.*



*18 We know that everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning, but he who was born of God protects him, and the evil one does not touch him.*

*19 We know that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.*

*20 And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life. <sup>21</sup> Little children, keep yourselves from idols.*

*If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater. That is a very interesting phrase when you read it next to the Acts reading for today. What is the testimony of men? What is the testimony of God? God has testified concerning his Son. Having read much of John's letter by now, you know that this testimony asserts the enfleshment of the Logos as Jesus of Nazareth. Whoever believes the Son of God, that would be us who believe, we have the testimony within us. But the one who does not believe the Son of God makes God out to be a liar.*

*The testimony is in us who believe, and the testimony is that we have eternal life and that life in Christ. The real testators, the ones who bear this witness are the martyrs. The Greek word for witness is "martyr." They are bearing witness that they have life, it is in Jesus. They are not afraid of death, the Romans can kill me but that is not going to shake my confession of the incarnate Jesus. My life is in him. You cannot take that away.*

*Problematically we have equated the word "martyr" with victim. The men whom ISIS fighters marched out along the Mediterranean Sea and killed were martyrs. John does not see them as victims but as people who are bearing witness to the victory of Christ over death. They did not forswear their faith in Jesus. They stood firm to the gory end. If you can, get the interviews with their families and the communities of Copts in Egypt from which they came. They are not feeling victimized, they are proud of these men. They see them as heroes, not victims.*

*This is really important. This is life itself. There is no life apart from the Son. If you have the Son, through faith, you have life. If you don't have the Son, you don't have life. That sounds like death to me. John is writing so that we who believe might know that we have eternal life and what is more we have an intimate connection with Jesus who hears and answers our prayers.*

*So far Phil's retelling of the text, but what does this all mean? What does this preach? It seems that John is actually highlighting the role of faith here. But that of course demands we return to one of our familiar questions. What is faith? The most accurate word we have in English to put up with that is trust. This is what a little child who jumps into her father's outstretched arms has. She trusts. We have confidence toward him. We know the reception we will receive, it is based on the blood of Christ, who has given us eternal life. We know that the requests we make of him are heard charitably. He won't do whatever we ask, because he loves, not because he is angry with us, or something like that. That puts the entire power of God at our disposal. John does give us an out here in that the prayer which is spoken according to God's will is thus empowered, but*

*that does not take anything away from the promise. It does allow the skeptic to scoff and the unbeliever to continue in his unbelief. God will not prove his presence and our faith, but he will love those people into the same sort of faith which turns to the Father and says, "Abba" with the Son.*

*This of course is also tied to the master theme of the whole book: Incarnation. Jesus as the one who sits on that throne above all thrones brings his humanity to that place as well. He does not leave it on earth, moldering in some grave, but it has ascended to heaven's glory. The very power of the universe today runs through perforated hands. Jesus brings the very best of humanity with him to that throne, the compassion that looked on the crowds and hurt for them, the tenderness which welcomed the little children into his arms, the friendship which wept by Lazarus' tomb and the willingness to heal every disease and open every blind eye and deaf ear.*

John 17:11b-19 (A little more context here too.)

*<sup>6</sup> "I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. <sup>7</sup> Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you. <sup>8</sup> For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. <sup>9</sup> I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. <sup>10</sup> All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them. <sup>11</sup> And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. <sup>12</sup> While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled. <sup>13</sup> But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves. <sup>14</sup> I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. <sup>15</sup> I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. <sup>16</sup> They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. <sup>17</sup> Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. <sup>18</sup> As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. <sup>19</sup> And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.*

*<sup>20</sup> "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, <sup>21</sup> that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. <sup>22</sup> The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, <sup>23</sup> I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.*

*Why does our text break off at verse 19? Why not include verses 20-21 which bring this prayer right into our church today. We are the people who believe because of the word of these disciples for whom Jesus is praying. Do you print your readings out in the bulletin, consider lengthening this one.*

*And what will we do with the prayer of Jesus – that they may be one? There are over 30,000 different protestant groups in the United States. We could talk about the invisible church of the believers, but it rings hollow when we turn around and save our most savage blows for the ELCA or the church down the street. We love to critique the Pharisees in the Gospel accounts, but sometimes we really sound like them and act like them.*

*Is the good news that there is only one heaven and it will be filled with folks who are not members of my denomination and we won't care about that? The great ecumenical thrust of the 20<sup>th</sup> century seems to have run its course and we have settled into a level of comfort with the dividedness of the Church. Does that mean we have a problem? Does God have a problem with it? Can we ever see this unity this side of heaven? What does it look like? I don't know that I have answers to these questions. But we cannot shy away from them just because we don't know the answers. Ultimately, this is in God's hands. The answer to Jesus' prayer is hard for us to imagine.*

*Chapter 17 has often been called Jesus High Priestly Prayer. Is the good news of this text simply in the prayer, the fact that Jesus prays for us. He is at the Father's right hand, he has access, and he is praying for us. He has the ear of God. Does this connect us to the Epistle reading – that we now have confidence because we can talk to Jesus and we can be confident that these things are heard?*

*I am no longer in the world...seems to shoot my initial essay right out of the water doesn't it? But read on, and you will find that we are sent just like him, in fact we are as much out of the world as he is out of the world. John seems to have Jesus taking his time to tell us that we are in it but not of it. We don't really fit in this place, we really belong somewhere else, at least in a world which is not plagued by all this sin.*

*Jesus asks that God sanctify us, and perhaps we also need to take a few moments to understand that word today. Harold Senkbeil a number of years ago wrote a very good book on this, published by Northwestern Publishing House. It was entitled simply "Sanctification" and was I recollect a very readable text.*

*We are sanctified in the truth, according to Jesus' words here. To sanctify literally means to make a saint of, to make holy, to set aside for a divine purpose, to purify, and more. As good Lutherans we attest that the Holy Spirit sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth and keeps with Jesus Christ. This is clearly looking forward to next Sunday. Jesus is praying for our Sanctification and in a week God will answer that prayer with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.*

*But just what does the Holy Spirit do to us that we need him? We have lots of big theological words like sanctify and enlighten, but if you asked your people what the Holy Spirit really does, I wonder what they would say. Having served a congregation in southern Oregon and having grown up in Missouri, I know that there is a large swath of American Christianity which says that if the Spirit is there you will know it by certain signs. If the signs are not manifest, you cannot be sure. But that seems rather limiting of the Spirit, what is more it seems to say things about Him that Jesus does not.*

*The preacher may want to read carefully John 14-17 again because in those chapters Jesus speaks extensively about the work of the Holy Spirit, and he just doesn't talk much about glossolalia and prophecies. He speaks of faith, he speaks of connectedness to the Son and the Father. As we contemplate the ascended Christ and the promised Spirit this week, in this strange moment in between them both, we are given an occasion to ask what it is that this Holy Spirit really does for us. My prof in the Sem said that the Holy Spirit seems to be very shy. Jesus needed to "step out of the picture" in one sense so that the Spirit could do his work. The Spirit only works when there is a gap to bridge, and as long as Jesus was with the disciples, there was no gap. But now, having "left" in one sense, Jesus is more present here because the Spirit makes him present not in another person, but in us and through us. We experience Jesus now much more intimately than the disciples did.*

*I think that is hard to swallow for us. We yearn to see the miracles, to sit in the boat as Jesus calms the storm, to rejoice with the lepers cleansed and the blind who see. Yet, the Gospels are also pretty clear. Though they saw these things take place, the disciples without the Spirit were pretty clueless about all this. Don't imagine that you have an inferior relationship with Christ just because you are not sailing with him to the other side of the Sea of Galilee tonight.*

*This has profound implications for us. Temples of the Holy Spirit, we are made holy ourselves. Not in that we have attained to some moral perfection, but because the one whose blood cleanses the whole world has taken up residence in our lives. We are not merely made holy, but we are the agents of God's holiness in the world. He makes things holy through us. It is the Spirit who makes the waters of Baptism the loving touch of God for infant and elder alike. It is the Spirit who turns bread and wine into the sustaining body and blood of Jesus. It is the Spirit who empowers my preaching to become the message of forgiveness and love my people desperately need to hear.*

*You can thank Luther for re-emphasizing this insight in the Catechism. Our human nature tends to think of holiness as purity, something which is ruined if sullied by sin. But Luther correctly noted that what made the Spirit "Holy" and what makes the catholic (Christian) Church holy is not that sort of purity but the fact that they make things, especially people, holy. Now, of course, the Holy Spirit has that sort of purity as well, but any purity we would claim has to be a purity which he has imparted. Our holiness, however, is really a statement of what we do. We forgive*

*sins. We baptize people. We commune people. The Church is holy because in doing these things it makes people holy.*

*One of my dear friends and colleagues who struggled through a long ministry in a congregation which was torn up by a charismatic movement in the 1980's once told me that if Lutherans had just owned their own theology of the Holy Spirit, there would have been no thirst for a Pentecostal experience and a Charismatic movement. Do you agree with him? Are we perhaps emotionally and spiritually stuck living in this uncomfortable time between the Ascension and Pentecost? Is it time to let the Spirit out of our control and to do a few things in our midst? It is frightening to consider. We like to think we are running the show and the Spirit can be quite unpredictable. A fellow named Saul found that out on the way to Damascus, Peter found it out in Cornelius' house, and every time the Church has rediscovered the "blows where he wants to blow" nature of the Holy Spirit something uncomfortable and wonderful has happened.*

*Jesus prays that the Spirit might be poured out on us. We need him. The preacher today will want to let his people feel that need, pray with Jesus, and rejoice in the gift promised and delivered two thousand years ago, on Pentecost, the birthday of the Church which we celebrate next week.*

## **Law**

1. I can't see Jesus. I would very much like to see him with these eyes of mine. I find myself looking down the road, around the corner, wanting to see him. I imagine that if I did see him and knew that he was really there, I would run up to him like one of those lepers or tax collectors and he would take care of the problems under which I am buried.
2. This desire to see Jesus, which is good, can also become an idol which blinds me to his real presence in my life. I have a hard time listening to the witness that he does give me. The testimony of the 12 which I read in my New Testament, the blood and water which last week testified to the presence of Christ, and the faith which my parents handed down to me can seem inadequate to the challenges which I face, which I believe are so much different than those which anyone else has faced.
3. And thus, I strike out looking for my own solutions to these problems, or defining the solutions which God should provide. But that is not faith speaking, that is un-faith, disbelief.
4. And thus my desire to pray is empty and the problems I face become huge issues in my life instead of exciting opportunities for God to do something creative and good.

## **Gospel**

1. Jesus is here. He is right here for hands to touch, mouths to taste, ears to hear. Despite my blind groping about for him on occasion, he puts himself into my life in beautiful ways.

He has poured out His Spirit to call, gather, enlighten, sanctify and keep me. I don't need to look down the road, I don't need to stand on my toes to peer over some crowd, Christ has kept his promise and never, ever left me, even when I have forgotten about him.

2. And thus he calls me back to reality. My problems are not bigger than the solutions which has provided. I am not facing such a different situation; in fact, my own situation is that which has plagued humanity since the day our first parents rebelled in a garden: Sin. God has done something about it, a cross on which he died, a tomb from which he rose, a Spirit who brings me to this Jesus. I do not need treatment more special than that. The same rules apply to me that apply to all, God's grace is sufficient for me; God's love has come to me.
3. Jesus today lovingly stands at the center of my life and calls me home. Frantically scurrying around the perimeter of my existence, holding back imaginary boogey men, he stands calmly in the living center, he calls me back to his arms, to his blessing, and to his gift. He is the solution I desperately need and the solution which I marvelously have.
4. And so today he empowers my faith and my prayers. The boogey men whom I struggled against may or may not be really out there. My fear of death is reasonable, after all, but even that ultimate enemy is not an occasion for my fear but my wonder as God even undoes that one.

### **Sermon Themes**

1. Living with the Son (Epistle Series – That the hearer would confess the presence of Christ in his/her life and see everything through that lens.)

This sermon will call the hearer out of a narrative and into a different narrative which defines his/her life. This is a re-ordering of the whole person, not just mind but life itself. Jesus has risen, once on Easter now so many weeks ago. Now he has risen again, up into the sky where a cloud has obscured him from our sight and we are left looking up with disciples wondering, "Where did he go?"

Our task is really that of the angels this morning. We would disabuse them of the foolish idolatry which looks up, expecting to see someone, instead of looking out and in and finding the very one we are looking for. Jesus is not far away, sitting on some throne in heaven listening to angelic choirs sing but far removed from my life and my daily existence. His ascension has changed his presence, yes, made it better. He touched me in the water of baptism. His voice is heard in this and every sermon which has proclaimed the Gospel to us. He comes inside us quite literally when we kneel at this altar and partake of this sacrament. He has not left us. He is right here. We may long for the day when he shall descend from those clouds with myriads of angels and that will be a beautiful and glorious day, but it will not make him more here, just differently here.

John does not speak of a Christ who walks with us like the maker of footprints in a lamentable poem of some years ago. This is Jesus is far more intimately present in my life. He is right in me, in my words, in my deeds, and in my whole life. He is right there beside me too, in the lives of the people whom I love and who are sitting here with me today. He is seen in the faces of the people who need forgiveness, help, mercy, and care around me. He is seen in my own face as I offer that care to them, and sometimes I see him in the face of the person who helps me.

God's testimony is true, he has given us life and that life is in Christ. We who believe have life, therefore we have Christ.

The preacher here will have several options for developing a sermon direction.

- a. The fearful person might be emboldened by this presence of Christ.
- b. The timid may find courage when called upon. More than once I have trembled at the prospect of what lay before me, but in retrospect I have to admit that Jesus pulled that off.
- c. The discouraged individual might find new hope in the fact that he/she is facing no problems alone. The discouraged congregation who has read the recent Pew Research Study may really want/need to hear this.
- d. The lonely person could find a companion who will always listen, who has a word of comfort, who cares.
- e. The angry, anxious, and fearful will find shalom in his presence. He is larger than the problems we face and our lives are perfectly in his hands.
- f. The one whose life is rent by conflict and strife might find that Jesus still is there to heal and help his distraught people. The forgiveness we speak and may speak with his authoritative voice is bigger than any sin.
- g. The one whom the world has stomped upon may find that this present Jesus, also once crushed and killed by this world, has risen from the dead and will never be defeated by death again.
- h. The one facing decisions might find the Jesus who smiles on all of life – promising that no matter what choices we may make, he will always go there with us and find some way to bless us in it. A congregation who has prayed for discernment in a call process might need to hear this. There is not a right or wrong decision, but every decision will be an opportunity for Christ to bless us.
- i. The one overwhelmed by the needs of those around her or him may find that the presence of the same Jesus who used Peter to feed the multitudes or used Luther to spearhead the reformation would use her or him as well.

This list could go on. Perhaps you will add one of your own.

2. Sanctified in Truth (Gospel - that the hearer would rejoice in the promise delivered – God has taken up residence in his people, including you and me – and that renders us truly holy.)

This is really a sermon about the sinner/saint tension which we Lutherans understand and love so much. It would have been understandable if Jesus had looked out over that motley crew of disciples that day and decided that he really needed to upgrade. Illiterate fishermen, tax collectors, and other similarly powerless people make an unlikely foundation for a movement which continues to this day. But Jesus knew something about these men which they did not even fully grasp. He knew that the prayer which he prayed, the prayer that they would receive the Holy Spirit would be answered. Next Sunday we will celebrate that day. Peter will stand, cowardly and craven Peter, who a few short weeks before had denied he even knew who Jesus was, that Peter will stand and deliver an amazing sermon and thousands will believe and be baptized. That gift of Holy Spirit is not limited to the day of Pentecost. He also has you in mind when he prays this prayer. You too are sanctified in truth, God has also taken up his presence in your life, and that means he has rendered you holy. It is true that sinners cannot be tolerated in the presence of the holy God, but he has not lashed out at us in righteous anger, but he has instead sent Jesus into the flesh and we are today made holy by his gift. We are the fit dwelling place for God, not by our deeds, but by his deed. Rejoice today, Jesus has prayed for you, God has heard that prayer, you are sanctified in truth!

What does it mean to be sanctified? What is it that makes us “unholy” that we need to be made holy? The Old Testament enjoined the OT people to offer a sin offering for all sorts of occasions. They brought a lamb when they harvested their crops, when they had a baby, when they buried a dead body. All these things are the result of being cut off from God. Some of them happen to us, some things we do to ourselves, but it doesn’t really matter, the result is all the same, we are simply cut off from God.

Our unholiness then is really about our separation from God, we are sanctified when Christ through his Holy Spirit has plugged me into God! Creation is like a great coffee pot we might find our church basement or fellowship hall. We make a pot of coffee and then we unplug it to bring it out to serve. It slowly cools off. Creation, since the fall, has been slowly cooling off, it retains some good heat, there are things which are good about creation, but it cannot be truly alive again until it is plugged into the creator. You might more profitably remind them of the vine and branches imagery of a few weeks ago.



Pentecost, for which Jesus prays today, which we will celebrate next week, is God plugging his people back into Christ, giving them the life, the presence of Christ, the Grace, all the gifts which they cannot gin up on their own.

It is a really hard thing to talk to Lutherans about this. We are really good at remembering we are worms who deserve only death. But God has also said we are precious children, holy and pure and good. To deny that truth is to deny the very word of God. But don't let it end there. God's word also creates the faith which trusts the promise and the statement of God. He has given us a life – he wasn't kidding. He really means it when he says he has purified us. It is a true promise.

3. He Hears Us (Epistle - That the hearer would be empowered to a life of prayer which flows not from guilt or obligation but from the faith which trusts and loves Jesus)

Why do we pray, why should we pray? Jesus prays for us today in the Gospel lesson and he still prays for us. Did you ever wonder why Jesus has to pray? After all, he is God. He speaks to his Father but doesn't the Father already know what Jesus wants, what Jesus is going to say? Haven't they already talked about all this stuff for the eternity they have had together? What else is there to say? Of course, that misses the point of prayer. We do not pray with the idea that we are telling God something he doesn't know. He is very hard to surprise! He often surprises me in my limited world, but he is not surprised by me.

We pray because he loves to hear our voice. Why does a loving husband hold his wife's hand? It is not because he wonders what it feels like. He knows. Why do we seek out the presence of a friend? Do we need to see them because we have forgotten their face? Hardly! We hold each other's hands or we seek out that face, because we love. Likewise our prayers to God are rooted in this profound truth, they are the expression of love and words spoken in a loving relationship.

God has told us that he always hears our prayers with a friendly, a cheerful disposition. We have confidence in our reception, says John. We are always sure that we are heard by him and our requests are important to him. Prayer is an expression of relationship, it is bringing our problems great and small, our joys, our heartaches, our weariness, to one who never grows tired of listening to us. Because he can live in every moment a billion times, he can give us his undivided attention right now. He has given everything to make you his own person, and always rejoices to hear your voice. He literally makes time for you! We say that but mean we will squeeze something else out. Jesus, being the creator, can literally make time for you! If six billion prayers are said this moment, he will make six billion moments for each of them. You always have his undivided attention. Your

prayers will never be competing with someone else's prayers for his ear. You are always a priority for God.

The law development of this sermon may be that we have lost the relationship. Watch out for that, or if you say it, announce that God makes that relationship and has given us Christ. That word keeps resounding in these texts. Don't let the discussion come to the point where you leave people looking at their poor prayer life and concluding they are not Christians. Be the loving husband or wife who seeks out the spouse who is isolating himself/herself. Be the parent who knocks on the teen's bedroom door. You want to talk. God wants to talk. It is not that the marriage is over or that they are no longer your children. Something might be hurt, but the relationship still lives. God sees to that.

This Sunday between Ascension and Pentecost, the last Sunday of the Easter Season, is a great time to talk about prayer. One of the reasons he rose from the dead is to listen to you! Having ascending to his throne on high, he also has the authority to do something about what you say. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him. He promises always to be by your side.

There is a great scene at the end of "The Horse and His Boy" by C. S. Lewis in which Shasta is walking over a mountain pass. It is foggy so he is unaware that to one side is a steep precipice. Suddenly he becomes aware of an immense presence. It is between him and the edge he cannot know. He finally screws up the courage to ask who it is, and of course it is Aslan. Aslan's answer is what interests me. He answers Shasta's question with "One who has been waiting for you to ask." What a picture of God present, pining for us to talk to him. Aslan was still helping, defending, protecting him without the conversation, but Aslan desired it.

4. 12<sup>th</sup> Witness (First lesson - That the hearer would be equipped to bear witness to the living Christ, as Matthias was chosen that day to be the witness to Christ.)

Texas A & M has a tradition of the 12<sup>th</sup> man. It stems from a story many decades ago when football was not such large business. The team was shorthanded and they got a student out of the stands who suited up for them and ended up winning the game. We could be the 12<sup>th</sup> man!

Where did this Matthias guy come from? Or the other guy, the one who was not chosen. Joseph Barsabbas, also called Justus? I don't read about them in the Gospels and here they get tapped by Peter to be a potential witness. You have to wonder if they were hoping the other guy won. I am not sure I would want to be on that committee. Only one of them died of old age, after all.

This is a really fascinating text because it shows us that God has resources that we cannot even imagine. Have you ever started to do something and wondered if you would be able to get it done or how it was all going to come together and then it happened? I have

actually presided over more than one Sunday School Christmas program like that. So far, so good, no terrible disasters, someone always comes through in the pinch. One year one of the second graders just could not stand up in front of the crowd, unfortunately he was a soloist for one of the songs. Blessedly another of the students had memorized all the lines and verses and without ever practicing it carried it off rather well.

I also remember a food bank we started which we did not know how we would support, but we did it in faith. Within a year or so we were supporting 10 times the number of folks we thought we could. God had come through with resources we never imagined.

You and I are often God's hidden resources, resources he brings to situations where people are not looking for us. I once had a parishioner who was a legal secretary. Her bosses did not expect her to do much more than her job. But one day, when they were in a bind and contemplating falsifying records, they found that their blond legal secretary had a few things going for her – most importantly she had a moral backbone. She bore witness to Christ that day, that honesty and virtue are good things worth pursuing of themselves. It cost her the job, but they heard the lesson, God gave her another job, for a firm which did not ask her to lie. And in it all, a seed was sown. Who knows exactly where it will bear fruit.

We look around us and often count only the deficits. Does God see the same congregation of people and count the resources? Does he smile to know what he could inspire that little old lady in the third pew to do? Does he rejoice to know what the young man who bashfully sits in the back is capable of? Does he look at the old fellow who mowed the lawn this week and see something far more than we do? I remember one old duffer in my first parish who was a rather inept handyman around the church, but who could pray jaw-dropping prayers that left this young preacher humbled.