

“Rooted to the Earth”

Ascension Sunday

May 29, 2022

One minute Jesus was there with the disciples, and the next minute, he wasn't. He spoke to them for the last time and then disappeared inside a cloud. Just google “ascension” and you get more than a picture of Ascension Providence Hospital. You'll see hundreds of images of Jesus raising his hand in final blessing, his face, even on the relative stillness of the computer screen, seeming to grow more and more indistinct as he vanishes into the fog of a cloud, slipping out of the disciples' reach until he was no longer there for them, no longer their leader through the familiar landscape.

Though we cannot see the Spirit, we can see where the Spirit has been. There's a wonderful woodcut of Jesus' ascension by the 16th century German artist Albrecht Durer.

It's similar to some other illustrations of the disciples that look like they're trying to grasp Jesus's feet to bring him back down to earth. If you look closely at Durer's Ascension picture — not the up in the clouds portion, but on the ground part — you'll see that he carefully etched muddy footprints on the skyward side of the globe. Or perhaps, he, too, is asking us, "Why do you stand looking up into heaven?" Your job, your ministry, your task today is on ground level.

Indeed Jesus' feet could have gotten muddied up quite a bit from time to time. They stood in the waters of the Jordan while John baptized him and God blessed him; they carried him through a storm in a boat across the sea; they planted themselves on the mountain of the beatitudes; by the village well where a woman came to draw water; they walked to find mud to apply to a blind man's eyes. Jesus surely must have

met people, with muddy feet like his, who ended up in the middle of a story he created – a neighbor, wounded beside the road; a planter walking through his field, sowing seeds in different kinds of soil; a son who went out to a far country.

In February 1981, when I was in seminary, I received a biography of Jesus with very few words and sparse illustrations: *He Was One of Us: the Life of Jesus of Nazareth* by the Dutch artist Rien Poortvliet. His drawings tell the story; at most he added a short caption. I always pull the book off the shelf as we approach worship planning for Ascension Sunday. My copy is so used and worn that I noticed on Friday that the last two pages have been Scotch-taped onto the inside back cover of the book. I am so taken by the last picture – all the tiny little disciples stand out in the middle of a field in Galilee that looks a lot like the wheat fields of Ukraine (the

Mount of Olives is nowhere to be seen). All the tiny little disciples are still there; I checked Friday. Knowing what growing responsibility Jesus's disciples have year by year, I always like to make sure no one has left. After hearing Jesus's last words to them, you just never know if they're still committed to the task. The tallest one is perhaps 3/8 inches high against the backdrop of the flat and endless landscape that looks like a vast universe for ministry to me. On the opposite page, way up in the sky to the northeast, past the miniscule disciples, the author and illustrator Poortvliet hand-lettered these words: "Now it all depends on them. Jesus entrusts everything to them. Will they continue his work? Will they live in his Spirit?"

What if we were the disciples hearing Jesus's commissioning for the first time? What if we were promised

that his power would come to us shortly after he ascended?

How would we, these tiny little human beings, feel if we had the hope and care of the world entrusted to us? Would we say “yes” to his calling, his work, his invitation?

Would we accept all the risk and energy that go along with saying “yes”? Would we join our lives to a community that honors Christ’s way of peace in our world? Would we take care of each other? Would we tell the stories we heard our teacher tell about loving our enemy as our neighbor? Would we beat our swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks? Would we welcome the children and let them come into our arms in Jesus’s name? Would we tell the story about letting our light shine? Would we not only tell the story, but would we really let it shine, let it shine, let it shine?

The disciples, standing on the cusp of a journey into the world without their leader, were probably a stewpot of emotions – a little over forty days after Jesus’s crucifixion, they were still in the early days of grief from the raw view of his suffering. And yet they had been overwhelmed by the joy of the resurrection. But, for some of them, mixed in with that joy were memories of early doubts about the Risen Christ, as well as memories of miraculous catches of fish and breakfast on the beach, of the tenderness of eating the broken bread, and the tears and confusion on the road to Emmaus. Then there was the pure exhaustion. Over and over again, events came into their world that they never dreamed could happen – and now, here they were amidst the joy and the sorrow and the doubts and the miracles – and the pure sudden loss of their friend in a way they could not wrap their minds around.

This was grief. This was fear. This was starting over again. So much they couldn't comprehend. How much their hearts had happened since the Resurrection! How could their hearts possibly hold it all?

No wonder all the disciples stand around, craning their necks, hands shielding their eyes, trying to figure out what just happened to Jesus. All heads tilted skyward, looking at . . . a cloud? Jesus' feet? Scenes, in their memories, from the last three years? As the disciples stand there looking up, two strangers in white robes suddenly appear. But the disciples are so tunnel-focused on Jesus' sudden departure that they do not even notice the strangers' presence. One of the white-robed strangers speaks: "Why do you stand looking up to heaven?"

What could they say? Jesus was gone. Vanished. Taken up. Returned. Ascended. However you want to put it. The

risen Jesus was there – and then he wasn't. Therefore, in the middle of such mystery and confusion, it only makes sense that the disciples were still standing there – grief-stricken, awe-stricken, panic-stricken without their beloved teacher and friend.

These are emotions we can relate to, especially now, news from Uvalde has shaped our week in a way that nothing else has done. None of us has read a news story, opened an email, or entered a conversation with someone we love without mentioning the horror visited on the families in Uvalde. We have grieved; we have been angry; we have felt vulnerable; we have wondered how the story unfolded and sought answers, turned from the news, and questioned the news; some of us have written our government officials about our gun laws; we have noticed how people in far parts of the

country or the world have grieved for the people of Uvalde as though they were next door neighbors; realizing our human and spiritual connection, we've felt unbearable loss.

Late Friday night, Roxanne Gay's words in *The New York Times* caught my attention: "We have created a museum of unbearable sorrow," she said. Then I saw Amanda Gorman's "Hymn for the Hurting," also written in the wake of the unbearable sorrows in Uvalde. Let me share some of her prayer/poem with you:

Everything hurts,
Our hearts shadowed and strange,
Minds made muddied and mute.
We carry tragedy, terrifying and true.
And yet none of it is new;

May we not just grieve, but give:
May we not just ache, but act;
May our signed right to bear arms
Never blind our sight from shared harm;

May we choose our children over chaos.
May another innocent never be lost.

Maybe everything hurts,
Our hearts shadowed & strange.
. . . when everything hurts
May everything change.

“May everything change.” “May everything change.”

“Why are you looking up?” I wonder if the white-robed stranger had to ask the question a second time. In the midst of the disciples’ stupor, the words from the white-robed stranger startled them enough that they stopped looking up, brought their eyes back down to earth, and returned to Jerusalem to join the rest of their community.

In time, the Spirit would overshadow them and bestow the Spirit’s power upon them so they could continue what Jesus had started. After all, the story of Jesus’ ministry here on earth had only just begun. The Holy Spirit was on the

way, and the church's public ministry was about to begin. But like those disciples, it's understandable that we are not there quite yet.

On Thursday someone talked with me about the very ideas that Amanda Gorman captured in a poem – the grief, the fear, the search for hope, the questions about how to change the culture. With the speaker's permission, I share a “paragraph” of that conversation:

“I couldn't sleep again last night. I just want to drive down and help. But what good would that do? I'd just be in the way. All I can do is what I already have to do – keep getting up in the morning, keep trying to sleep at night, keep feeding my family, keep going to my job, keep taking people where they need to go . . . “

Those words from three days ago led me to think of the way some familiar words from Paul to the Philippians fit with the commissioning of the disciples:

Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

The words of the Dutch spiritual writer Etty Hillesum give us a starting point for moving toward God's peace. She wrote them in a concentration camp in 1943. "Ultimately, we have just one moral duty: to reclaim large areas of peace in ourselves, more and more peace, and to reflect it towards others. And the more peace there is in us, the more peace there will be in our troubled world."

May it be so, and may it be soon. Amen.

Teresa of Avila gave us good words to carry with us to help us know the urgency of our task. Caroline just led us in reading them. Hear them again as our benediction today as God's Spirit leads us into our world:

Christ has no body now on earth but ours,

no hands but ours no feet but ours.

Ours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion sees the needs of the world.

Ours are the feet by which Christ is to go about doing good.

And ours are the hands by which Christ blesses everyone now.

