

Today's Ascension readings tell the disciples – who R us – that we will no longer see Jesus as a local citizen of Nazareth. Jesus' presence is now risen and ascended over the whole cosmos.

In our post-pandemic world we can play with this in new ways – like Jesus now goes off to work remotely from heaven. As involved as ever, Jesus zooms in from a heavenly seat at the right hand of God. Embodiment takes on new shape.

But here's the curve ball. The Ascension doesn't stay focused in heaven. As we hear in Luke, Acts, and Ephesians, the disciples (who, again, R us) are essential to the story. *We* have been commissioned to be Christ's risen body in the world.

It'd be easier perhaps to keep gazing into heaven, but the story doesn't allow that. It is like God sends an alarming curve ball with the Ascension – a radically new direction we forget we actually signed up for.

Weeks ago on Palm Sunday we enacted Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem by way of the village called Bethany. The Old Testament names Bethany the location where the long-awaited Messiah is to arrive (Zech 14:4). With that arrival comes expectation! The Messiah will save God's people and set a world of wrongs right.

But Jesus' death shatters those expectations. The disciples hope Jesus will redeem their world – save them – not die and leave them! The crucifixion is a devastating blow.

But then comes Easter's surprise! God raises Jesus. Jesus even shows up for a morning fish-fry along the shore. He appears to Simon, Mary Magdalene, and to us, in the breaking of the bread. Easter is ongoing!

But now the story arrives at the Ascension. The story says Jesus ascends to the right hand of God. And here's what this curve ball looks like. The ascending happens at Bethany – but instead of arriving, the Messiah departs. The curve ball throws Jesus up and out of sight.

Hope again shatters. The Messiah was to stay and heal things. Easter restored hope after the crucifixion, but now confusion and doubt return.

The Ascension presents as bad news at first, unless, that is, the disciples, and we, listen to what Jesus is telling them and us.

Listening to Jesus is key. The Transfiguration story said, “Listen to him.” At Jesus’ baptism we hear, “Listen to him.” Repeatedly, the gospels say, *“You have heard it said, but Jesus says to you.”*

Ascension does this too. “You’ve heard it said, the Messiah will come and bring “all-rightness,” *but I say to you, **you** will be given power. Not me, says Jesus, but you!*”

The impact of the Ascension is only half-named calling it the Ascension because it’s both an “ascending” and a “sending.” Interesting how those two sound alike. Ascending and a sending. With the Ascension comes our commissioning. We, the baptized, are to anticipate power coming on us.

The Ascension is two-fold – involving Jesus **and** us. The promise is, **we** will be given power from on high. And it’s already happened - at our baptism. If you’re not baptized yet, just say the word and we’ll get on it.

The celebration of this empowerment focuses us this Sunday **and next**. Today’s Acts chapter 1 says, “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you.” Next Sunday, Acts 2, will tell the Pentecost story – the 50th day of Easter – the Birthday of the Church! We celebrate being born again and again to be Christ’s empowered presence in the world.

I titled last Friday’s Eblast “Almost too much to believe.” It is almost too much to believe that you and I are empowered by the Spirit – a power Ephesians calls “immeasurable greatness of God’s power for us!”

This may feel out of sync with real life – “immeasurable greatness at work for us” when we often feel powerless, so human, even clueless. Even with a fine campus, accessible restrooms, and a new roof, we can feel at a loss as church about how we can really rise up into being Christ’s body in the world. We’re just human!

Yet this is the Christian faith. God raises Jesus from the dead and instead of sending Jesus back to work on earth, God sends the Spirit on us – making us Christ’s risen body! The Bible declares us empowered to do God’s work with our hands. This is our ELCA motto.

The biggest challenge here may be, we forget this is what we signed up for in Baptism. We forget who we are – baptized children of God – empowered through water and the word to do God’s work. If we’re honest, we might rather Jesus just do it and we cheer him on.

But the story says Jesus now cheers us on. This is the Christian story. And the truth is, we’d miss out on the joy of being who God creates us to be – ones sent to love our neighbor, care for the least and the last, do those things Jesus did. This is our calling!

And the Spirit promises us the power to do it. All we need is openness to receive. So we ask God to grace us with trust that the Spirit does indeed empower us to love as we’re loved, to serve our neighbor, to make a positive difference in the world.

Because our God is holy, always ever more than we ever understand, yet always at hand, we can trust this. God comes even now in bread and wine and Word and Christian fellowship to bless and fill us.

May we rejoice in this today, next Sunday, and for the rest of our lives. With the eyes of our hearts enlightened, may we know the hope to which God calls us, the immeasurable greatness of God’s power at work in us.

Amen.

You Are Holy – ELW 525