

ASCENSION DAY 2009

LUTHERAN/EPISCOPAL SERVICE

My grandmother was a simple woman who lived in small, southern kitchen. Over the years, we were nourished by her cooking as well as by the love and concern she showed for all who came under her roof. In my own growing up, I would often sit in the kitchen with her while she cooked. She lived on a small farm down in the low country of South Carolina. On many a summer day, I sat in front of the open breezy window of her kitchen while she canned pears -- basking in the warm, inviting smell of pears and cinnamon, mixed with the perfumed breeze of lilac and hydrangea. The smells weren't all I was taking in though. My grandmother was also trying to nourish another part of me. She was trying to feed my soul as well. She was always trying to teach me about the faith and about that beautiful part of me that God loved and cherished as his own.

As the years passed, I grew up and moved to another state. I didn't see my grandmother very often, but when I did, she was always quick to press canned goods into my hands. Mostly they were jars of pears since she had many pear trees in her yard. I was young and not much of a cook then, so mostly the jars of pears just accumulated on my pantry shelves. Shortly before the birth of my first daughter, I went to visit my grandmother and once again she gave me two jars of pears as I left. As I usually did, I simply placed them on the shelf of my pantry and forgot about them.

A couple of months later, within a week after my daughter's birth, I got the phone call that my grandmother had very suddenly died during the night. I was devastated and because I had a tiny, newborn

infant, I was reluctant to make the nine hour trip with her for the funeral. I missed my grandmother immensely...missed the warm summer breeze of her kitchen window...missed the smell of pears and cinnamon...missed her melodious voice feeding me affirmations. The months passed. One evening, while my young daughter played in her play area in the kitchen, I looked into the pantry for something to make for dinner. I spied the two jars of pears she had given me shortly before Sarah's birth and thought it would be a good idea to make a pear cobbler for dessert.

I arranged all the ingredients, mixed up the batter and then reached for the jar of pears to open. As I popped the seal on the lid, the smell of pears and cinnamon washed over me like a vast wave. I was overwhelmed and as the smell filled my kitchen, I found myself weeping. There was more wrapped up in that smell than I could ever even begin to describe. Suddenly I felt...deep at the very core of my being...everything my grandmother had tried to teach me over the years. Suddenly I knew...with a deep down kind of knowing...that I was the valuable child of God that she believed in. It was hard for me to understand, but I suddenly did understand, that in my grandmother's absence, I felt her presence all the more strongly. Had she still been alive, I might not have ever felt compelled to open that jar of pears or to understand what had gone into their preparation as deeply as I understood it today. Sometimes, to truly realize the effect a person has on your life, that person has to go away. Sometimes to realize one's true presence, that person has to be absent.

Today we celebrate that day in our liturgical year when the Church remembers and honors the Ascension of our Lord into Heaven...that time when Jesus, through his Ascension, goes away; and

the disciples learn what it means to have Jesus become more present to them through his physical absence. How did the Feast of the Ascension make its way into our liturgical year? There is no documentary evidence of its celebration until the 5th century; however, writings of St. Augustine and St. Gregory of Nyssa indicate that its origins are even earlier than that. Luke and Mark are the only Gospels that make mention of the Ascension, and Mark's account seems to have been a later addition. Luke, in fact, offers two accounts that differ in some detail. In the Gospel of Luke itself, Jesus ascends on Easter Eve after having made three Resurrection appearances to his disciples. In Acts, the Ascension takes place 40 days after the Resurrection. The account from Luke which we heard this evening describes the Ascension as the culmination of Jesus' Resurrection appearances. After opening the minds of the disciples to the understanding of Scripture, he blesses them, but then withdraws from them. Tradition tells us that Jesus ascends into heaven so that he can sit at the right hand of God from which he will fill all things in the world with himself.

Well, so is he going or is he staying? Is he absent from this world or is he present? Sometimes, as we consider the Ascension and its meaning, it is hard to know which it is, isn't it? Regardless of what we do believe, the Ascension does mark a shift in the ministry of Jesus. The Ascension marks an end to the historical Jesus...that Jesus who existed in the form of a human in this physically formed world; with the end of the historical Jesus, the Ascension ushers in the age of the Church...that age in which Jesus, who is no longer limited to his physical presence on Earth, fills all things and empowers the church with his own resurrected power. The celebration of the Ascension of our Lord presents us with a paradox: Jesus ascends into Heaven, taking

his physical body away from us, only to make himself more present to us. The problem with paradoxes, though, is that while they sound all cute and tidy, they are often messy and difficult to understand at the level of the heart. However, I believe that as we consider the Ascension, we can recognize three things that do make sense to us. First, the Ascension calls us to recognition of Christ's presence to us. Second, the Ascension calls us to recognition of our destiny in him, and third, the Ascension calls us to recognition of our responsibility to the mission of the Church.

First, we are called to recognize Christ's strong presence to us in this world, even though the historical Jesus and his physical body have vanished. Startling as they were, the post-Resurrection appearances were convincing enough. Jesus showed his disciples his hands and his feet, had them touch the marks of his wounds. Further, he consumed broiled fish in their presence. Disembodied spirits don't eat. So it is clear that even though the disciples may have thought at first that they were seeing a ghost, the evidence Jesus presents to them convinces them otherwise. Then after he has opened their minds to Scripture and blessed them, he ascends with his physical body into a realm to which the disciples do not yet have access. His Ascension marks the end of his Post-Resurrection appearances and the beginning of his presence in a new, more powerful way. Tradition tells us that through this Ascension, he is positioning himself to confer messianic benefits on his disciples and on the world in a way that he could not have done had he remained in the physical, historical realm. Hence, Jesus is more present to the disciples and to the world by virtue of his Ascension. Through my own grandmother's absence, conveyed to me through the simple act of opening a jar of pears, I learned that she and all she tried to

confer on me is more powerfully present than had she remained in my historical, physical world.

Secondly, through the Ascension, we are also called to recognize our destiny in the Ascended Jesus. The Resurrection focuses our attention on Jesus' physical body. This focus on the physical counters two Greek beliefs popular at the time: 1) dualism and 2) the concept of immortality. Dualism divides the world into physical and spiritual, and says that the physical world is bad but the spiritual world is good. The concept of immortality, which grows out of this dualistic understanding, says that, at death, the good spirit or soul separates from the bad body and continues to live independently of the body. Over the years, the church has blurred our understanding of the Doctrine of Resurrection. Jesus in his post-resurrection appearances as a physical body recognizable by sight and touch, counters the notion that he is a disembodied spirit that will live blissfully and eternally in a heavenly realm not accessible to us. The Scriptures clearly teach us that we too shall be physically resurrected from the dead. With the Ascension, Jesus takes our human nature, glorified into heaven. There is no demarcation between the physical and the spiritual. Our destination is to be resurrected physically, and to live as glorified beings ourselves in the Kingdom of God. In my grandmother's leaving of this world for the next, I was able finally to understand what my own destiny was...a beloved child of God. C.S. Lewis says that in the form of Jesus, "God descends to re-ascend." Jesus has come among us as a physical being. As he ascends to the Father to dwell with him, in a sense, he takes us with him. Are we there yet? No, not completely, but as we contemplate him ascended and sitting exalted at the right hand of the father, we get a glimpse of our destiny...of what we too shall become.

Finally, we are called, through the Ascension, to recognize our responsibility to continue the presence of Jesus into our own historical presence. Because Jesus was present to the world physically, and because he continues that physical presence in the realm of God, we are empowered to extend that presence in our own world. In his final blessing, Jesus calls the disciples out from Jerusalem into the world. No longer are religious leaders supposed to wait for pilgrims to come to Jerusalem to be in the presence of God. The disciples are empowered with “power from on high” to take the presence of God out into their own physical, historical worlds. Mother Teresa, during her pilgrimage here on earth, knew only too well that Jesus needed her hands and her feet to carry the Gospel out in historical existence. With the absence of Jesus from the physical, historical world, she understood that she had the power and responsibility to carry his presence into that world. Our Ascended Lord, present to us now in spirit, needs us to tell the good news in human, earthly terms. Sometimes the work is glorious. But often it is mundane. Brother Lawrence once advised, “It is not necessary to have great things to do. I turn my little omelet in the frying pan for the love of God.”

Perhaps that is the secret...doing things for the love of God. Perhaps Ascension Day is a good reminder that the work is not yet completed and that every little task we do in the name of Christ extends his presence more fully into this age, and takes our presence more fully into the next where he sits at the right hand of God. My grandmother, in her warm aromatic kitchen, always exhorted me to be the best I could be...to realize who I was as a child of God and to convey that to the world. She is gone now, and in her absence I feel her presence more strongly. Even more, I feel compelled to be responsible

to all that she exhorted me to become. Jesus has ascended into heaven. In his absence, he is more strongly present. We recognize that he beckons us to follow him into his glory, and that to get there we need to seize his presence, so powerfully bestowed upon us in the Holy Spirit and extend that power into the world in which God has so deliberately placed us.

Almighty god, whose blessed Son our Savior Jesus Christ ascended far above all heavens that he might fill all things; Mercifully give us faith to perceive that, according to his promise, he abides with his Church on earth, even to the end of the ages; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting. *Amen.*

Grant, we pray, Almighty God, that as we believe your only-begotten Son our Lord Jesus Christ to have ascended into heaven, so we may also in heart and mind there ascend, and with him continually dwell; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*