

The Rev. Gabriel Lawrence  
Easter 7: The Sunday After the Ascension, Year C  
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St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, OH

On this Seventh Sunday of Easter, we find ourselves situated in one of the most interesting periods of our liturgical calendar. What we mark today on the Seventh Sunday of Easter makes this day one of my most favorite out of the whole year. Three days ago, we celebrated the Ascension of Jesus into heaven. Next Sunday, we will celebrate the arrival of the promised Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. But today...we find ourselves in this in-between time. Jesus's life and ministry has culminated in his ascension, and the Holy Spirit that he promised he would send, has not yet arrived. These ten days between the Ascension and the Day of Pentecost, like any time of transition, give us time to pause and reflect. While Jesus could have immediately sent the Holy Spirit in a Divine move of "tag, you're in!", he chose not to. And I don't think this was accidental. In times of transition, we need time to reflect. We need space to think about what was and prepare for what is to come. And so, let's do a little bit of this work of reflecting by looking back at this Easter season and some of what it has offered us.

We began this season six weeks ago on Easter Day proclaiming at the grave, "alleluia, alleluia, Christ is risen!" The first thing we experienced this season was joy. And we celebrated with glorious hymns, a brass ensemble, easter lilies, an easter egg hunt, baptisms, and perhaps easter brunch. And then, still basking in the joyful glow of Easter, we moved deeper into the season on the second Sunday of Easter with the story of Thomas, doubting Thomas as he has come to be called. Thomas's initial reaction to seeing the resurrected Jesus was not alleluias at the grave- but rather doubt. Suspicion. Denial. Our reactions to new life in our midst can sometimes be like Thomas's- suspicious, or even, when something good like resurrection comes along, the foreboding feeling of waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Then on the Third Sunday of Easter, we heard about some of the disciples fishing in a boat when Jesus appeared to them from the shore. These simple fisher-folk, as a hymn text calls them, had, in the absence of Jesus among them, gone back to what they had known- fishing for fish. And when their friend and brother Jesus appears to him, they don't even know who he is. They don't recognize him as who he is. Sometimes when new life, new possibility, new things enter our lives, we, too, don't even recognize them for what they are. Sometimes resurrection feels joyful, and other times it feels unknown, unrecognizable.

Then on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, also known as Good Shepherd Sunday, we receive Jesus's words of comfort to us as a Great Shepherd of the sheep. We learn on this Sunday that when resurrection, new life, new possibilities, stir up in us doubt or suspicion or the power of new life renders us unable to recognize it for what it is, Jesus, the Good Shepherd meets us in our human frailty and comforts us, holds us close, tends to our needs, and makes us to lie down in green pastures.

On the Fifth Sunday of Easter, we hear the words from Jesus to his disciples that they probably never wanted to hear: “I am with you only a little while longer”. Just as they were beginning to settle back into the fact that Jesus was actually alive, resurrected, they now hear this news that Jesus is leaving them again. In hearing these words about an impending farewell from Jesus, we learn that sometimes resurrection also means separation- that, in order to live into a new chapter of life or a new season of growth, we have to let go of what was. We enter into a paradigm shift in which we let go of what had grown old and take on what is becoming new. Sometimes resurrection feels like pure joy, and other times resurrection feels like separation from what we know as familiar.

I think that in our tradition, Easter is a season and not just a single day, precisely because we need a container of time large enough to begin to process all that it holds, large enough to let what it holds sink into our spirits. I think Easter teaches us more than anything, perhaps, that new life breaking into our midst is an invitation to explore the full array of our humanity- how new life and new possibilities can make us feel joyful, doubtful, skeptical, suspicious, unmoored, hesitant, all of these and more. So, when we say we are an Easter people, we proclaim that we are not just a people who live from deeply rooted joy found in the resurrection of Jesus, but we are also an Easter people who embrace all that the resurrection stirs up within us. With Thomas, we embrace doubt and hesitation. With the other disciples, we admit that sometimes we don't recognize resurrection when it appears in our lives for what it is. That, sometimes resurrection, new life, takes a while to settle in, to get to know, to understand. We need these six weeks of Easter to experience the different facets of the resurrection of Jesus so that we can have a practice run at experiencing different facets of new life when it shows up in our own lives.

And we need this time between the Ascension of Jesus into heaven and the Day of Pentecost to sit with all that we have experienced. We need this time of sitting in the in-between in order to prepare our hearts for the gentle power of the Holy Spirit that sweeps through our lives and prepares us to do the work we have been given to do.

Stephen mentioned last week that the Feast of the Ascension is perhaps one of the least celebrated major feasts on our calendar. And I regret that. The Feast of the Ascension can feel like a toss away feast day because, on the surface, all we are marking is Jesus's return to heaven. But I believe it is so much more, and I believe what it does offer us is central to our faith and our identity as Christians. In the aftermath of the resurrection of Jesus, Jesus stays with us just a little while before leaving us. And while this leaving no doubt felt painful and was full of emotion for the disciples- and for us- this leaving was necessary. Jesus had to leave so that our work- the work he gave us to do- could begin. Jesus had to leave so that the disciples could go on to do even greater things than Jesus, as Jesus himself had told them. He had to leave so that the Church could be born and spread and grow and ripple out into the world the healing and saving love of Jesus to all people. The Ascension is the moment in history where Jesus says “I have prepared you to do the work of God, to build God's kingdom. Now it's your turn to go and do it.” (*don't slow*)

Friends, it is our job now to do this work. Let us rest and reflect in this in-between time, surely, but let us rest and reflect with intention so that we can ready ourselves to be empowered by the very Spirit of God to build God's Kingdom and change this world!