

The Holy Gospel According to Luke:

Then Jesus said to the disciples, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you--that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled."

Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

We can only speak the truth metaphorically—and metaphors are shaped by time and place and culture. Some people show their love with food, others with jewelry...others with major appliances. (We cannot all be romantics.) If we want to speak of the things that matter most in our lives the best we can do is point. We won't all say it in exactly the same way.

The Gospel is about eternal truths: God is undivided—One. Yet God is revealed in diversity, and in relationship—which is what the Trinity is trying to get at. God loves the world. We are called to love God and neighbor.

But the task of getting at these truths is always particular. Otherwise it feels like pious platitudes. It kind of hangs in mid-air. You can tell people to love God and love neighbor until you are blue in the face but it takes on new meaning when you tell the story about a dad who had two kids and one of them found himself in serious trouble before he finally “came to himself” and headed home. It takes on flesh when you tell the story about a mugging on a dangerous road and the one who proves to be neighbor is a hated foreigner—a Samaritan. Two thousand years later that doesn't mean much, so you've got to translate. You've got to tell the story in a new way to say the same thing. So maybe you tell the story as if you are in a rough section of Worcester when your car breaks down, and a good looking Episcopal priest drives by in his Toyota Camry and a well-dressed attorney does the same in his BMW, and then a Middle Eastern man who looks a little too much like a terrorist stops in his old beat up car that is in need of a new muffler and he helps you out. Who is neighbor?

So we need to remember these lessons on a day like today—but maybe it's even harder for us. We live in a post-Galileo, post-Copernicus world. We've been to the moon to the point where it hardly seems like a big deal. We have that image of the earth seen from space emblazoned on our brains. We know that the sun doesn't really “rise” in the east and “set” in the west even though it looks that way. We know that the world doesn't have four corners, so that taking the gospel to the “ends of the earth” as if it were a table is just a manner of speaking. We know that

heaven isn't "up there" and hell "down there" in a universe that is built like a three-tiered wedding cake.

We know all of that but Luke didn't. I believe that the sacred texts he contributed to the Bible—the third gospel and the Acts of the Apostles—were inspired by God. I believe that they convey profound truths, eternal truths—a Word of the Lord for the Church in every generation.

But like all language including religious language it is metaphorical. We do not and should not deny what we know about the world and accept Luke's worldview and think that is a way of getting at the truth. That's simply a false choice.

Where did Jesus go on Ascension Day? Up, up and away...on a cloud? In the Bible wherever you see a cloud, it's a metaphorical way of saying God is there. And it's a good metaphor, too, because a cloud is noticeable but also not exactly solid. When Moses goes up Mt. Sinai in the Book of Exodus to speak with God, God comes to Moses "in a thick cloud." (Exodus 19:9) In fact there are more than fifty references like this in the Torah—the first five books of the Bible. Throughout the story of the Exodus it is the pillar of cloud that goes ahead of the people, leading them toward the Promised Land. (see, for example, Exodus 13:21) In the New Testament, that same imagery is used at the Mount of the Transfiguration when the voice of God speaks from the cloud: "this my beloved Son." (Matthew 17:5) The tradition is that the Son of Man will return on a cloud at the end of time.

What Luke is saying is that Jesus really is who he says he was. I think today's collect gets at the meaning of this day better than the imagery from Luke: Ascension Day is about how Christ "fills all things." He is not "up there"—but also here, for he "abides with his Church on earth, even to the end of the ages."

I think that the meaning of this day is incredibly important to us and the danger is that we will miss that meaning if we are too literal.

But hear again Jesus final words to the disciples before he returns to God, in order to fill all things with his presence.

Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.

Now let's just take that slowly, one bit at a time. First of all we are defined by the events of Easter. That should come as a surprise to no one here. We are an Easter people. And Easter doesn't begin on a Sunday morning. It begins with a life lived boldly, courageously, a life lived toward peace and justice and wholeness. Jesus' ministry, we need to recognize, is not always embraced with open arms. Health is scary. Health calls on us to live not as victims but survivors. Health means living into the future, not stuck in the past. Sometimes, quite frankly, it is easier to remain sick. Sometimes Jesus scares us because he demands so much of us. But he also shows us

the way—and it is the way of the Cross. It is the way that does not avoid conflict but the way that faces fear and death head on. And that trusts that Good Friday is never the last word. The Messiah suffers, but on the third day is raised from the dead. In Holy Baptism we have been buried with him in order to live with him.

The good news we are entrusted to proclaim to the world in Christ's name is about repentance and forgiveness. If only we Christians could really live that, and let the world see how lives are transformed by the grace of being a forgiving people. Too often the Church has been a place where we collect grievances. What happens when we really model reconciliation and repentance and forgiveness? I think of that Amish community that instead of choosing vengeance chose to forgive the perpetrator of a violent crime. That is never easy. But it bears witness to what we are all supposed to be about. What happens when the world sees us living in those kinds of ways?

I think that what happens is that we do really begin to embody “good news” for the world—which is what evangelism is all about. We bear *witness* to the love of God. We are *sent* into the world with a mission.

All of this is possible by the gift of God's Holy Spirit. That is what next Sunday is all about—the Feast of Pentecost. So stay tuned!

In the meantime, we listen to Jesus—because he is the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. He will keep us on track.

- The mystery of our faith is that Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again. Easter shapes our way of being in the world—our reading of human history, and the ways that God is our past, present, and future. At the center of all that is Easter.
- Forgiveness and repentance are at the core of what makes us the Church—at the core of discipleship. We cannot be a hard-hearted and unforgiving and unrepentant people and at the same time claim to be followers of Jesus.
- We are sent out, into the world, as witnesses. We need to claim that in our own ways and a parish that bears the name of Francis does well to remember that our witness is not about inundating people with words or sermons. We preach the gospel at all times with our lives; when necessary we use words.
- The Holy Spirit will be with us as we continue to grow and learn and do this work that God has given us to do. More on that next week...

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