



# TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*on the Branford Green*

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

## **After the Ascension**

**By the Rev. Sharon Gracen**

**June 5, 2011**

One of the younger members of our congregations asked me last Sunday what we were going to be doing this week. I told her that we were going to be talking about Jesus rising up to heaven to be with God. Her eyes got wide and she said, "Ooooo!" What a lovely wonder-filled response! The Ascension is one of those parts of Jesus' story that we tend to gloss over, perhaps because we aren't sure what to do with it. The childlike wonder in us might want to stand looking up into the sky with a kind of, "where has he gone and will he be back?" kind of yearning for something to hang onto. The sophisticated twenty-first century mind in us might want to approach the whole story metaphorically. Perhaps we should do both.

Jesus was not the first person in the Bible to be taken up into Heaven. In the book of Genesis, Enoch was the first. He was the 7<sup>th</sup> generation of the human family that began with Adam and was the father of Methusela, the oldest of the Biblical old-timers. The 5<sup>th</sup> chapter of Genesis gives us the first genealogy, or the begats, as we like to call them, and in it we get an anomaly which is the only thing that makes the genealogies interesting. They are usually just lists of who was whose father but suddenly we get, not only Enoch as the father of Methusela, but that Enoch walked with God...then he was no more, because God took him." Apparently he was so righteous, so in line with God's intention for him that he was spared the experience of death and was "taken" by God. That's his whole story, although he is mentioned in Luke, Hebrews and the letter of Jude.

Then we come to Elijah, the other figure taken up to heaven. As every Passover meal, there is an empty chair and a place prepared for the return of Elijah, another one who was taken up by God. We know a lot more about him. He was a mighty prophet, who challenged all those rulers who chased after false gods, particularly the god Baal. Elijah raised the son of the widow of Zarephath from the dead, beat the priests of Baal in a wizarding war, and in the final story about him, he called Elisha to be his successor before he was swept up to heaven by a whirlwind. His is a great story and it echoes through that of Jesus. People wonder if Jesus is Elijah returned. Peter, James and John see Jesus transfigured on the mountain top with Moses and Elijah, the human representatives of the word and the prophets.

The lives and means of departure of Enoch and Elijah are great harbingers of what is to come with Jesus. From their stories we understand how to describe Jesus, righteous and pleasing to God and a great prophet, mighty in word and deed. In his ascension, Jesus completed his story of righteousness and true power to its ultimate expression.

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The story of the Ascension is also an important detail, the cleverest of Jesus' story, the one that explains "where is Jesus now?" Dr. David Cunningham, who was one of my professors at Seabury Western Seminary, has this to say in his book about the creed called *Reading is Believing*, "Luke is addressing a problem faced by every writer who has ever created a character who must eventually make an exit. Specifically, Luke has emphasized the fleshly reality of Jesus, particularly the fleshly reality of the body of Jesus even after his resurrection from the dead. And yet, the writer has no immediately available method of getting his main character "offstage." ...By describing him as having "ascended into heaven," Luke solves this problem and, in the process, provides a dramatic finish to his narrative.

But this is more than a plot device. Dr. Cunningham gives us a window into some of the unacknowledged information in the resurrection/ascension story. Jesus is portrayed as resurrected to a fully human state, he gets hungry, he eats, he has wounds, and he carries our wounds. And in the ascension, those wounds are also taken up to heaven. The incarnation is made complete with the welcome that humanity's wounds receive in the realm of God. Jesus ascends in his most human condition – wounded.

All of which brings us to Nelson Mandela's words today; another key aspect of the ascension is its affect on those who are left behind. It was all clear and easy while Jesus was walking around on earth but in his absence we are called to change our thinking about ourselves. A couple of weeks ago, in our gospel reading Jesus had this to say, "Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these." Obviously Jesus had high hope and expectation for those who carry on in his name. He had to hope that all of his teaching had found fertile soil in the hearts of the downtrodden, oppressed people who had never had any experience with empowerment. He knew that the least had the greatest opportunity to do the most.

That sounds kind of like Nelson's people. What must it be like for people who have been oppressed for so long to suddenly be presented with the keys to town hall. For generations they had been denied their full humanity, but they had clung hard to the self-knowledge that they were not what the white minority had claimed. They were smart, resourceful, and worthy. They just needed to be able to show the world. And then suddenly the eyes of the world were turned toward them to see what kind of a nation they would create. Nelson Mandela, in his wisdom, understood that sudden empowerment could be frightening. It can also turn sour if it is not directed by a compelling vision. Such freedom requires a shift in consciousness that demands vigilance to stay righteous. It must overcome the inertia of an old familiar drama in which someone else makes all of the decisions. Embracing freedom and power simultaneously can be a challenge. Sometimes it is just so easy to sidestep responsibility and a healthy self-image when you're not used to it. Nelson knew how hard it was going to be for his people to grow up quickly and become citizens of the world after having only been prisoners of Soweto and other ghettos.

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The disciples probably didn't believe Jesus when he said that they would be capable of doing all that he did. And then he was gone and they were faced with having to live up to it. There is pressure that comes with accepting that you are, in Nelson's words, "brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous." Those are much like the words that we use in the Thanksgiving for the Birth of a Child. "Bring this child to love all that is true and noble, just and pure, lovable and gracious, excellent and admirable." We believe that our children are just as Nelson describes us, but then somehow we forget to think that about ourselves.

To me the most poignant words we heard in Mandela's speech today are "Your playing small doesn't serve the world." The world needs us to live large and to love large, to dream big and to hope much and do all that is in our power to make our world more like Jesus' vision. Nelson has never stopped telling his people that they can do this. Unfortunately, for a lot of its history, the church has done just the opposite. It has crafted a theology focused on sin and helplessness in the face of our own failings. It has scared people to death with the very idea of death and what might come next. The dominant religious voice for 2000 years has not told us that we are brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous. It has told us that we are miserable sinners incapable of any good on our own. I think that that might surprise Jesus because for him we were worth his own suffering and death.

I believe that however we might think of Jesus' ascension into heaven, it did not cause him to change his mind about us and decide that we are any less worthy of his love. So great is that love and forgiveness that even the marks of the violence done to him are absorbed back into the great love of God from which he came and to which he has gone to prepare a place for us. And why wouldn't he want you to follow him there; after all, you are brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous. That certainly deserves an Alleluia!

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