

Grace to you and peace from God and from our savior who is Jesus the Christ.

It's an old tradition, to extinguish the paschal candle on Ascension Day as Jesus born of Mary, crucified and risen, now ascends to heaven. I've always loved it, watching the smoke curl up, imagining what it would have been like to be there to get this last glimpse of Jesus in glory in the cloud that (*Parker, Christian, Elora?*) have drifting past us.

For this, I always score, not a trumpet, but an oboe in some bluesy riff to accompany this achingly poignant, gloriously uplifting, exhilarating moment.

In the Holy Land there are a couple different places on the mount of olives that claim to be the place Jesus gathered the disciples for his ascension. One of them has a plaster cast of Jesus' last footfall on this earth before he returns to the heavens - as though we could hang on to something.

Luke, the gospel writer who also wrote the book of the Acts of the Apostles, tells this story of Jesus' ascension twice.

In the gospel from Luke that ends that book, Jesus gathers everyone in the old hangout in Bethany, where his friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus lived.

It's an intimate, neighborhood moment. Jesus' closest family and friends, ravaged first by the death of Lazarus, then Jesus crucifixion, bowled over by raising up and resurrection, now get to see God's vindication over powers that tear us apart and destroy. Banishing any lingering empty-tomb doubt they see Jesus clearly as the Risen Christ of God taken to God's right hand, to reign there as the king he was mocked for being, to uplift them, and bring creation to its fulfillment.

It's always then been curious to me that having concluded this story so satisfyingly and intimately for us, Luke then turns right around. In the book of Acts, he starts a story of the spread and witness of the Christian church by telling this same story again to open up a whole new thing.

In *this* version of the story the ascension also takes place on Mount of Olives, but overlooking Jerusalem. Here, the ascension reads more like an event of the church than personal experience. He brings the angels at the tomb back to redirect us, to bring the reign we've all been commissioned with.

It wasn't til I visited the Mount of Olives that I think I figured out what Luke was trying to convey by telling this story from two different angles.

It turns out that actually both stories take place on the mount of olives. Bethany, the place Jesus cares for loved ones intimately is on one side of the mount, and the overlook to Jerusalem where the church's corporate life in God's Pentecost Project begins -- is just the other side of this same hill. And isn't that the truth!

Today we are once again reminded of the "for you"... the new life we take into our own bodies in Jesus' real and intimate presence to us in holy communion.

And on the other side of the coin: we experience this in our gathering as the household of faith, in the one body of Christ, as you are launch a new chapter in your corporate life. As you pray in these days for discerning not just a new call for a pastoral leader, but the call to Immanuel at this present time in the nation and in the world's life.

We chewed for a long time at our Wednesday discussion over what Jesus says to the disciples as they faced Jerusalem. Jesus tells them to wait for the Holy Spirit to baptize them, to just drench them with an upwelling life and power of love.

But the disciples assume they know what their mission is, what God has in store for them, what they are waiting for. They just want to know the timing part of it.

When. When will you restore us to ourselves? What phase are we in?

Jesus outlines not so much a “restoration” plan, but a much more ambitious... agenda? Forecast? Mission Plan? With outgoing circles far wider than they thought God’s plan for restoring was about: not just their people, their nation, but the whole creation. They also don’t seem to expect that in the middle of this, Jesus will just lift off from there and leave them hanging with all of that.

So what is it they – we – are waiting for? We talked about a couple things.

A pastor.

Your building, all the cloud of witnesses in there waiting, but like the angels in Isaiah’s vision up in the rafters in smoke and glory calling holy holy while we are still worshiping with our whole lives.

A coming back together... but maybe some surprising new directions?

Is this a time when we should be planning, someone wondered? Active waiting?

“Were the disciples planning,” someone else asked? What were they doing?

Well, they were blessing and praising God, presumably in whatever they were doing in the wait. They were continually worshiping during the “delay”. During the time it takes God to act and take us again by surprise.

You know what? They do, do something though.

I’ve signed up for the Chicago Illuminated Bible Manuscript Project to dwell in the Word more fully in these days. I chose Acts Chapter 1. I saw that the very next thing they actually do, when they get to Jerusalem, it turns out.... is that is they pick a new disciple to live among them.

Not only is Jesus ascended, but Judas is no longer with them, and they have a vacancy in the core leadership team. They come up with two names of those who had also followed Jesus, to consider as one body.

It might sound crazy, but here was THEIR discernment process: they roll the dice on which one it will be! I’m not kidding. They roll the dice.

But it’s not quite as casual as it sounds. They trust. They trust as they bless God in all they do, God will be with them and bless whichever leader it is.

Luke tells the story this way: “they prayed and said, ‘You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship....’ And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias, and he was numbered with the eleven apostles.”

The ascension transforms our all lives as disciples. Its glory doesn't necessarily restore what was, but gives us hope and uplift with those who stood on the broken-hearted side of the Mount of Olives. Jesus does not leave you as orphans, but gives you one another. Gives you a song of glory to share. Doesn't leave you dead in the water but gives you an outward direction. And will in time fill the vacancy on your leadership team through a process that will not involve a pair of dice, I promise, but still will invite spirit-filled and open heartedness, and a ready-for-surprises-minded trust on your part.

Yesterday as I was following up with different folk at Immanuel, someone told me that they had some Prosecco on hand, and that's what they were bringing to this first dispersed celebration of Holy Communion.

It reminded me of Easter Vigils where this first Easter eucharist always popped a cork and didn't care if the wine just started bubbling and pouring out. Life that couldn't be stopped, as we lift up our hearts to the Lord of glory and new life. A God that can never be stopped, contained or limited, overflowing in joy and love.

God gives us this glimpse today of Jesus' glorious ascension as part of an ongoing story of a God who first straddled heaven and earth in the let-there-be Word of creation, then came among us in the flesh in Jesus' humble birth, and a now reigning Christ whose throne is heaven but whose footstool remains on earth – always to keep in touch.

Jesus promises that it is HIS own Spirit of Life that will come and is with you in each of your lives and in your life together as Immanuel, a living reminder that God is With us. God's Pentecost Project, as David Schlafer, Episcopal priest and homiletician used to say, is far from over. And you and I get to be in the thick of it. Let the people say, Amen!

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Immanuel Lutheran Church of Evanston

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