

Reformed Protestants have never been clear what to do with Ascension Day. We name in both the Apostles and Nicene Creeds that we believe in the Bodily Resurrection and that Jesus Ascended heaven. This event is essential FIRST because Ascension Day falls on the 40<sup>th</sup> Days after Easter, and we know that numbers like 40 are important throughout the Bible. Even more because this marks one of the points of transition:

- Prior to the Gospels we have the First Testament, from the Call of Abram through the rise of David's Monarchy, Dispersion and exile in Babylon, rise of Medes, Persia, Greece and Roma
- All the Gospels name that Jesus was Baptized by John where he began calling followers, healing and teaching, through his offering the new Commandment in the Last Supper; He was betrayed, crucified dead, was buried, and raised appearing to the Disciples; He ascended because Jesus does not still appear to people on a regular basis.
- After which comes the Day of Pentecost, with the Coming of the Holy Spirit, and the Going out of the Apostles and start of the Church.

But perhaps most importantly because the Church has placed great importance on Jesus' body. That body is the Incarnation of DIVINITY, the Body is a manifestation of EMMANUEL: God with Us. That body is what suffered and died as Atonement for our sins. That body is described in each of the Resurrection appearances, as being tangible real proof of Jesus being Resurrected, not simply stolen away or a Ghost.

The Eastern Orthodox and Roman Churches have not had difficulty with this because of their emphasis on mysticism, the unexplainable happened as written in holy Scripture. But the Reformation that created the Protestant Revolution was heavily influenced by the Enlightenment. In the Age of Reason, we stared into Heaven and questioned Really? I can believe what I can understand, so how did Jesus fly?

Part of the cultural folklore of the 1960s Cold War, is that when Yuri Gagarin was the first human in outer space, the first to be launched from Earth into the Heavens, as a Soviet he was remembered as having said "I looked and I looked and I looked but I saw no God!" Except that was all propaganda of the Soviet Union, Gagarin was a devout Russian Orthodox who when asked about that quote, reported that "AN ASTRONAUT CANNOT BE SUSPENDED IN SPACE AND NOT HAVE GOD IN HIS MIND AND HEART." His actual first words were: "How beautiful. Mankind must do everything in our power to preserve and care for this creation!" Rather than going to Heaven and finding No evidence of God, actually he landed 250 miles off course and had to go in search of finding any evidence of humanity!

Two Sundays ago, our Session gave permission to "Slowly, Gradually, Carefully, Begin, Lowering our Protocols." SO, knowing our Town has THE HIGHEST VACCINATION Level in the County, in the State and one of the highest levels in the Nation; we stopped taking temperatures and allowed people to sit closer than 6 feet. We required everyone keep their masks on, but allowed everyone to Sing the Hymns! On Tuesday of last week the CDC was grilled before Congress. Suddenly, on Thursday afternoon the Centers for Disease Control announced that those fully Vaccinated could remove their masks, in most settings! At least, while Pima County did not say EXCEPT IN CHURCHES OR HOUSES OF WORSHIP, they did at least say except in congregate settings. But I find myself looking up at the powers that be incredulous and saying "REALLY?!" Now we have folks singing without Masks and Sitting closer than socially distant! A significant element to Ascension Day is feeling incredulous! Everything we thought we knew has been challenged.

If we are to read this passage with an enlightened mind of reason, we see the Disciples on the Mountaintop still clinging to their image of Jesus in the clouds, as two figures of faith challenge them, Men of Galilee, Why do you stare at the clouds, when the work of Christ is here in this life? Even before the gift of the Holy Spirit, even before creation of the Church, there is a CALLING to invest more and more of ourselves not in the past but in the lives of others in the world. Insofar as the Scripture has already invited us to use our imaginations this morning: Rather than imagining yourself on the Mountaintop looking up at heaven; Imagine yourself a Stranger, who has been afraid, not leaving their home in the last 14 months. You have always heard about God, about people going to Church. So for your first venture outdoors in over a year, you risk going to Church. This is why I make it a point of going outside before we begin Worship, because if people have made the effort and taken the risk to come to worship, I want us to make the effort to welcome them, to encourage and comfort them in coming. You risked worshipping God, and beginning this morning we moved the tables in Fellowship Hall to encourage you to stay and visit together! You begin to get to know one another, and we encourage you to sing and to participate in the activities of the church. We ask you to consider claiming this church by becoming a member and giving. When Called upon that you consider becoming Ordained as an Elder or Deacon.

Which is where the end of this Chapter in Acts goes. Because of Judas' death, there were no longer 12 Disciples and question came "How do we replace a vacancy?" All throughout the Bible, there are means of selection, throwing Dice, casting Purim, here the wording is "They Prayed and Cast Lots" a more contemporary English might say "They Prayed and Voted" which is how we do so here. We hope and pray that prayerful selection of individuals becomes neither a matter of popularity nor a burden for individuals, but as odd as this may seem a true challenge and nurturing of your faith.

I find it intriguing, that more than any church I have known in 62 years, I have regularly heard Elders, Deacons and Committee members describe their "fiduciary responsibility," as if this were a financial and legal trust; yet rarely how the decisions before us as the Church impact our faith in God. Given our demographics, our community is well prepared for death. People in Green Valley live in 3 residences as we downsize. We have graded levels of assisted care, then Hospice, and the Columbarium. We have great Caring Ministries for loved ones afterward, but when and how do we describe the resurrection? According to Scripture, Heaven is not about Pearly Gates, Wings, or Clouds, BUT being ONE WITH GOD.

IF ANYTHING the circumstance throughout the world has been, I DID NOT GET TO SAY GOODBYE!, Because of Protocols I could not go into the Hospital. I could not hold their hand. I never got to say what I needed to say. And this passage from Acts does not focus on what the disciples said, but listening to what the one ASCENDING said, blessing their Apostles as they were returning to GOD for eternity!

Life is different here in the desert Southwest in the summer. I had a good friend who was a retired pastor in Michigan, who described his having officiated at the Graveside of a man. In Arizona the rock is too hard to dig down 6 feet, but oftentimes in Michigan in May, the grave would be excavated in mud for the cement crypt which fit into the hole for the casket, and boards would be laid along the edge for the Pall Bearers to walk upon. At the completion of the Service, the minister raised both hands for the benediction and asked everyone to bow their heads and close their eyes. They did so, but there was prolonged silence. As eventually they opened their eyes, the minister had vanished from sight. As everyone bowed their heads one of the boards had slipped out of the way, with his arms raised the

minister had fallen and was wedged between the earth and crypt where he could not get enough air in his lungs to cry out!