



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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Up, Up and Away

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, June 1, 2014
The Fifth Sunday of Easter—Based on John 17:1-11*

Last Sunday at the 11 o'clock service I enthusiastically announced that this Sunday, June 1st, was Pentecost. Apparently I was ahead of myself by one week; my older friends tell me to expect more of this. The most amazing thing about my misspeaking was that my clergy colleagues just sat there mutely and let me wax on rather expansively about how glorious the Day of Pentecost is and how it shouldn't be missed! I guess they were thinking, "My goodness, bless his heart, he's really is losing it!" Today is in fact the last Sunday of the season of Easter, the day on which we hear the story of Jesus' Ascension; and that can only mean that next week is indeed Pentecost, the birthday of the church.

Once I was the rector of a church named The Church of the Ascension. It was a wonderful and loving parish, conservative in many ways and yet graciously tolerant of those who aren't, even rectors. You can imagine that in several years of Ascension celebrations, I had the occasion to preach about this event with far more specificity, some might say conviction, than came naturally. To say that I employed every clever technique and some that weren't clever—in an effort to keep the peace and my job—is a sizable understatement.

There are very short references to the Ascension in the Gospels of Mark and Luke; Matthew and John are silent on the event. Our reading this morning about it comes from the Acts of the Apostles, a few sparse details given. The narrator without much fanfare simply announces: "As they were watching, Jesus was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight." Likely written as many as fifty years after Jesus' death, we can't know precisely how these early Christians heard and appropriated the story, whether literally or not. Regardless, my modern reading of it is that it is a lovely, poetic metaphor, a word picture of what was a stunning reality for them. These second generation followers of Jesus, almost all of them too young at the time of Jesus' life to actually remember him, ached for his absence, longed for his earthly presence in a way we can hardly understand. The spiritual presence of Christ is the reality we have; we know no other Christ and never have, save for the knowing of Christ in the lives of other human beings. Such was not the case for them. Jesus' leave taking was current enough to be raw.

We detect that longing in this passage from Acts. The narrator imagines the disciples saying to Jesus just before his leaving, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" This question reflects so much about the psyche of the early church and not a small amount about the church now. The disciples posed this question out of their struggle to explain the fact that the Kingdom had not yet come, not so far as they could see. Yes, there was the growing acceptance *among new Christians* that the grave had not stopped the essence of Jesus, that Christ indeed was alive. But theirs was not a powerful or victorious religion; and they were afraid, fearful of other religious sects and certainly of the Romans who had crucified Jesus. Their messiah had not triumphed but indeed had died an ignominious death, creating not just a public relations problem for the growing faith but also the requirement of a great spiritual leap from the literal to the metaphorical. Of course, they wondered: when is this kingdom coming? Fifty years have passed since Jesus' death, and the poor, the oppressed and downtrodden are not gone but increased. Where was evidence of the Good News Jesus had preached for the poor, the captives, the oppressed? Jesus had instructed them to pray, "Your kingdom come," and faithfully they had; and, yet, still the waiting continued.

In many ways that phenomenon continues to this day. Making accommodations through the ages, we too wait for the coming of the kingdom.

Beleaguered peoples, particularly, have over the years managed to remain faithful by accepting the postponement of the kingdom, viewing it as a future reality. Such hope oozes from deep within spiritual and gospel traditions: “This world is not my home; I’m just a passin’ through” and “Some glad morning when this life is o’er, I’ll fly away. To that home on God’s celestial shore, I’ll fly away”—songs sung by those whose hope for the kingdom’s coming resides not here but in the next life. This life is terrible, the one which is coming is beyond imagination—a message that lingers clearly in the religious right and less obviously but often in moments of despair for many Christians who are quite to the left of the religious right.

Folks like us, I suspect, are more likely to internalize or spiritualize this notion of the coming of the kingdom, using Jesus’ own words, “The kingdom of God is within,” as support for this approach. Though a good start, what often sadly happens is that the spiritual journey becomes so inward that it begins to sound a great deal like the latest self-help book on how to face life calmly and without damage to our interiority. The Jesus I imagine was not calm and no doubt had great damage to his interiority, regularly—because life was going to hell in a hand basket all around him. His love for the poor and oppressed enraged him, our calm, beatific image of him being mostly our creation. If the coming of the kingdom simply makes us peaceful in our precious hearts with blessed sweet Jesus, then little wonder we are unable to re-order the world, to effectively advocate for peace and justice, to change the systems that in fact prevent the coming of the very kingdom for which we pray every single Sunday. I want peace in my soul like everyone else—sometimes I think that is all I want—but in my soul I know that God’s peace stirs us up more than settles us down.

And so this ancient story brings us as God’s faithful people to a critical question, one posed in scripture, a crucial question that goes to the heart of what we as the Church are to do: “Why do you stand looking up toward the heavens,” they were asked. Again and again Jesus said that the kingdom of God has come near, is now and is within us. What on earth are we to do? As flawed as it is, as sad as much of its history is, I still believe with all my heart that we, the Church, the body of Christ, remain essential in bringing about the coming of the kingdom. I believe that places like this, and those more and less grand, need to survive, not as museums but as holy ground, not as centers of magic but beacons of hope, not as cloisters hiding us from the world but places that nourish us and then point us beyond these hallowed walls. I still believe that though I am usually a pretty lousy Christian, I’d be a much worse one without the community of the church. I still believe that God speaks, sometimes in spite of our ancient scripture and particularly in spite of our stodgy, limited and unimaginative reading of it. I still believe that farfetched stories, like the Ascension, can teach us something even when science and reason have led us to alternative ways of understanding them.

We are standing in the kingdom of God, my friends. The realm of God is right here, right now in the church and beyond it; and as bizarre and unlikely as it sounds, we with all our foibles and all our fears are called to live like we know the truth: in God’s realm there are no outcasts and every soul is sacred. There is good news to be told, and it is time for us to get our heads out of the clouds to tell it. The Christ we seek has come near and is among us.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

Note: in the preparation of this sermon, I received assistance from the work of William Loader, particularly in lectures given to Murdock University titled, “Being the Church Then and Now: Issues from the Acts of the Apostles.”