

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
Seventh Sunday of Easter
17 May 2015

Scripture readings:

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

Psalms 1

I John 5:9-13

John 17:6-19

Do you know what today is - the 17th of May?

[From the congregation: "It's Ben's birthday!"]

But long before Ben was born. Where are the Lutherans? Where are the Norwegian Lutherans? This is *syttende mai*.

[From the congregation: "I thought it was the 7th of May."]

Oh, I may be wrong. [Laughter] Well, it's either the 7th or the 17th. Tell us about *syttende mai*.

[From the congregation: "It's a big celebration of Norwegian independence."]

Yeah, and you know the phrase that goes with Norwegian independence:

Ten thousand Swedes chased through the weeds,

Pursued by one Norwegian!

[Laughter]

Well, now you know our heritage!

Way long before we descend into those identities of culture and language and clan and those identities that make us different from others, we have these extraordinary, precious and beautiful stories of Christian *in*clusion which involves this business of... Did you go to church on Thursday? Who goes to church on Thursday? *The Catholics!* We *could* go to church on Thursday, particularly this past Thursday, if we had planned to celebrate Ascension Day which comes forty days after Easter. In the history of the Church Ascension Day had various understandings. One was that the ascension happened immediately after Easter. But then the calendar grew to move Ascension back forty days which gave the Church time to recall all of the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, like when he shows up on the beach and is frying fish and on the road to Emmaus when he breaks bread and he's recognized after his passion, death and burial and resurrection. I think I was probably in my early adulthood before I realized there might be a difference between Easter and Ascension. Who knew?

As you know, we lighted the great Paschal Candle for the first time at the Easter Vigil. There are two traditions about extinguishing this candle. One is that it's extinguished at the reading of the Gospel on Ascension Thursday. Well, you weren't here! [Laughter] The alternative custom is to extinguish the Paschal Candle at the reading of the Gospel on Pentecost. So we'll do that next Sunday with a baptism when we remember all of the associations of Easter and resurrection and the descent of the Holy Spirit. Is there a better day for baptism than Pentecost? Probably not!

But today it's worth our while on the last Sunday of Easter to consider this business of ascension. Ascension and Easter in my mind for a very, very long time all had to do with the elevator going up. Then as I matured and learned about other traditions in Christianity, not least of which is the Eastern Orthodox tradition, I encountered the Orthodox icon for Easter which depicts Jesus' dress going up and he's going down. So guess which direction Jesus is going? Down. And he's standing over a gaping black hole on two brass doors that have burst off their hinges. And you know the hymn, "*Hark the glad sound. The savior comes...The gates of brass before him burst, the iron fetters yield.*" We'll have to learn that one. That's the allusion that's in the icon - that Jesus is breaking down the gates of hell, shutting down hell for good. And as he does that, as he's going down to hell... And you know that's in The Apostles' Creed: "*He suffered, died, and was buried; he descended into hell.*" We always just say that. Nobody ever thinks about it, right? Well, after he suffered, died and was buried, what's the first act of Easter? He descends into hell. Aren't you glad the Orthodox Church held onto that one and depicted it as Easter because the first act of Easter is the message, the good news, the Gospel of Christ is depicted as reaching behind all of time, all of history, all of space, and going back to the beginning of creation. Jesus in this icon is reaching into two graves, one of a man and one of a woman. And who are the prototypical man and woman? Adam and Eve.

So the Gospel of resurrection in the early Church is seen to have universal application. And here in the texts that

we read today we see the early Church struggling to understand and figure out how it is that Jesus could come in time and space two thousand years ago with a universal message that belonged to everybody. Wasn't God late getting here? I mean if God's going to save the shootin' match which was lost... how many thousands of years before Jesus was the creation? There are those who know that, you know. Don't believe them, They know that as well as you and I know it.

Why did God fail so badly until Jesus got here? That's a fair and good theological question to ask. So the Orthodox Church says, *"Well, God didn't fail. When Easter occurred, Jesus reached behind everybody and everything that had come before and saved it all."* I take comfort in that. And I take hope in that as we share in thinking about that kind of Easter we will be careful when we read stuff, dangerous stuff that we read in the lessons today. How about the reading from the first letter of John. *"And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life;"* Now I'd be happy if there were a period there but there's a semicolon. *"Whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life."* Well, I don't know what was meant when that was said, but I know how certain Christians today interpret that. Don't you? *"Unless you're a Christian who does it my way, you're going to hell and I'm pleased to tell you that!"* That's exactly where that line of thinking goes. My question of those people is, *"Do you really think God did such a bad job of creating the whole world that he left the third in China out? Do you really think that God's love has made such a big difference in your life that you are happy to see everybody else in the world go to hell?"* I think there's another equation that could be made here. *"God gave us eternal life and this life is in his Son, and whoever has the Son has life;"* And I'd like to add, *"Whoever has life has the Son."*

The way we understand God's salvation through the Church is of course limited by the Church's experience of culture and language and space and time and all of the rest of the defining boundaries inside of which we live. But Jesus - and I think I believe this with the ancient Church from the beginning - brings a universal message, a message to the whole world of God's love for all people. And I do think it's perfectly all right for us Christians to say, *"This is how God's love gets to me, period."* I must have the humility, I believe, to say I'm not sure how God's love gets to the person in China, but I believe that God loves that person as well as God loves me. And if I can't get to China to love that person, maybe God can do it some way else.

Of course Carol represents a missionary family that went to China and attempted to show God's love by building a hospital. And the Moravians were the first Christian missionaries in the western hemisphere. Of course in our lives we've come to learn that missionaries can do good things and bad things in terms of cultures and people and language. I mean was there any sense in putting African women in Victorian dresses? But we did it.

When I was a student at Drew University it was known as "the Princeton of Korea." The Korean students came back to the United States to study, having come from missionary efforts generations before they were born in Korea, with 19th century hymnals. That's what got there, that's what stayed there, and it was never updated or kept alive.

I think the business of ascension has something to do with direction for us as Christians. We remember on Ascension Day that Jesus, who lived and died among us so that we might know God's love and presence in this world, in the end ascends above time and space and history and even the future. Some of the artistic depictions of the ascension are really quite funny. Some of them just show a pair of feet going up. It reminds me of an old *Playboy* cartoon. Now I have your attention! Mary Poppins and a bunch of kids. *"Oh look! You can see up her dress!" [Laughter]*

The Renaissance painted Jesus like Mary Poppins. You can see up his dress. All they showed was his feet in the sky or God's hand reaching down to help bring him up or Jesus just going like this and going up. The elevator finally goes up! And here is this early understanding in the Church that Jesus' message belongs in the end to the whole world, to everybody. And that message is a simple one - that God wants to be here and God wants to be now. And when we say those things we're speaking universally. We're talking about our world so "here" includes China. "Now" includes you and me. This is what we call the theology of incarnation - that God wants to be known in flesh and blood.

So when I buried the ashes yesterday of George and Lillian Hulsp, whom I knew 44 years ago as lovely hosts

who cared for me on Saturday nights because I couldn't get to the church early enough on Sundays to serve as their organist and choirmaster, I suggested that some of the difficulty in the time of death is that we who survive are frightened that in the face and being and bodies of those people we have known and loved so much, where we have seen God so clearly, that God is disappearing, that God is going away, and that we are abandoned by God to ourselves and our own abilities. But St. Paul says, "*No. You're a part of a larger body than that and that includes all the people who are baptized members of the Body of Christ*" and that God is able to be seen everywhere and in every face and experienced in every human relation and that might include somebody in China or Afghanistan. It might include a Muslim or a Jew or a pagan. It might even include a Methodist or a Moravian, but I'm not so sure. *[Laughter]*

This business that God whom we believe, teach, confess and worship is an incarnate God simply will not go away, that there is no other way to know God than in human relationships in this world. And so St. Paul says. You as a believer know that. That's a part of what we confess - that by virtue of our baptisms somehow we function as a part of the mystical Body of Christ. We make Christ present in terms of how we care for each other and serve the world. And so somebody walks into church today and I said, "*Welcome. I'm glad you're here. First time here?*" "*Yeah.*" "*What brings you here?*" "*I want communion.*" I want to be in touch with God. I want to be fed. I want God's body to go into my body. I'm hungry. Where's the meat? Where's the incarnation? Where do I come in contact with the living God who will feed me, who will impregnate me with divine presence and enable me to share divine love inside the strictures of humanity, inside time and space in my relationship with others.

At times we equate the incarnation with the nativity and I think it's a huge mistake made in the life of the Church because if you think the incarnation has to do with the birth of Baby Jesus, then you can put him away for twelve months after the creche is dusty in the box in the attic and then bring him out next December 25th and cry copious tears of *Auld Lang Syne* and all the rest of it and forget that all year long you have an opportunity every day to celebrate God incarnate in yourself and in others.

So I've said it before and I'll say it again: I think the first page of scripture is probably enough Bible for me for the rest of my life. "*In the beginning God created the heavens, the earth, and everybody who lives in the earth, and God stands back and looks at what God creates and says I love it!*" That's all we need to believe. How dare you not love what God creates and loves? How dare you?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.