



## Ascension Day (A)

### Truth-Telling

**[RCL]: Acts 1:1-11; Psalm 47 or Psalm 93; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53**

Six Sundays have passed now since we heard that Jesus was raised from the dead. We have heard many stories this Easter season of how Jesus appeared to his disciples: Mary Magdalene found his tomb empty that Sunday morning after the Passover, and then she saw him in the garden. And on Sunday afternoon, there were the followers who saw him on the road when they were walking to Emmaus. They didn't recognize him at first. But when they arrived at their destination, he came into the house and sat down to eat supper with them and he lifted up the bread and broke it, just the same way as he always did, and suddenly they knew it was him. And Thomas actually touched him, put his fingers right into the spear wound on his side. Even though they thought he was dead, Jesus was alive and with them all the time. They could see him, and hear him, and touch him.

But today marks an end to Jesus being with his followers in this way. On this Thursday, which we commemorate as the Feast of the Ascension, Jesus took his inner circle out to Bethany — just outside the city walls, the place where Mary and Martha lived. The place where Jesus raised their brother Lazarus from the dead. And here in Bethany, Jesus told them the time had come, and that they should remember and keep telling all the people in Jerusalem and all around the good news that he taught. And then he raised his hands and blessed them. And while he was blessing them, he was carried up into heaven. Gone, disappeared, just like that. Despite his promise to send them “power from on high,” imagine how alone they must have felt.

It's tempting to ignore the story of the Ascension altogether, especially in a post-enlightenment world. It's hard to argue for the plausibility of such an obviously childish story when it's set against the incontrovertible facts we know to be true about how the world works: The earth is not flat. Heaven is not the realm above our heads, just beyond the clouds. There's no point in having Jesus float up, up, and away like that.

But maybe there's another possibility. Maybe this story — and all the other implausible stories that fill the Bible — maybe they're not there in eternal opposition to the facts, the math, the truth that science has revealed to us about quantum mechanics and general relativity and molecular biology and so on. Maybe taking these stories literally misses the point altogether. These stories are trying to point us toward

something bigger than themselves, toward meaning, toward Truth with a capital T. And this kind of truth isn't always an easy thing to tell in the world we live in.

Jesus was a political truth-teller. His teaching and his life were a rebuke to the powers and authorities of the world in which he lived. According to political philosopher Hannah Arendt, truth is “hated by tyrants, who rightly fear the competition of a coercive force they cannot monopolize... Unwelcome opinion can be argued with, rejected, or compromised upon, but unwelcome facts possess an infuriating stubbornness that nothing can move except plain lies.” Listen to that again: tyrants hate facts — hate the truth — because it can't be controlled and bent to their whim. The tyrant's only option in the face of facts is outright lies.

Arendt wrote this in an article titled *Truth and Politics*, published in *The New Yorker* in February 1967. Her point is that tyrants always attempt to twist reality to their own ends. She goes on: “Where everybody lies about everything of importance, the truth-teller, whether he knows it or not, has begun to act; he, too, has engaged himself in political business, for, in the unlikely event that he survives, he has made a start toward changing the world.”

*In the unlikely event that he survives* — survives the act of telling the truth. Insisting upon the truth is a good way to get yourself killed. Because the people at the top don't really *want* to hear the truth.

Jesus knew all about that. He knew that telling the truth about the way the Roman Empire was oppressing his people would be dangerous. He knew that overturning the money-changing tables in the Temple so he could talk about economic inequality would not endear him to the leadership. But he told those truths anyway.

Today, Jesus teaches a different truth with his ascension. Not just his words, but his actions reveal a new reality waiting to be born. Why did Jesus lead his disciples out to Bethany to say their final good-byes? Jesus chose to spend a lot of time in Bethany. It was always where he stayed when he came to the city of Jerusalem. This is where Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus lived.

Bethany wasn't a very nice neighborhood, though. It was outside the city walls, just out of sight of the Temple, in fact. The name Bethany translates to something like “the house of affliction.” It was where the city of Jerusalem sent people who were poor or sick. There was a homeless shelter there, and a leper hospital. Bethany was built out of sight of the Temple so that those coming into the city to worship wouldn't have to see all that ugliness, that poverty and desperation.

And that is precisely where Jesus chose to spend most of his time. These are the people Jesus chose to spend time with. He poured out his life in love for them. And Bethany is the last place on earth Jesus chose to be seen, among the poor and the suffering. This is the truth of the Ascension: that Jesus went from that house of affliction into every place and time, carrying in his heart the cares and concerns of all the poor people of the earth. And now he surrounds and infiltrates all times and all places with the beating

heart of this truth, sometimes hidden just under the surface, but always there, if you're willing to face it: the truth that real love costs everything you have, and it's the only thing that matters.

Amen.

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