

# No Smoke or Deception

*Preached by the Rev. Thomas M. Kryder-Reid on the Seventh Sunday of Easter, 16 May 2010, at Trinity Episcopal Church, Indianapolis. Scripture readings: Acts 16:16-34; Psalm 97; Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21; John 17:20-26.*

Today, as you may have noticed, is what's called the Sunday after Ascension Day. You may well be asking yourself: What in heaven's name is Ascension all about, anyway?

If you're puzzled, I can sympathize. At Easter, after all, we celebrate Jesus risen from death, his resurrection overcoming all powers that could ever separate us from the love of God. So, what is this additional part of the story that shows up forty days after Easter, this past Thursday as it happens this year? Does he rise again somehow?

The scripture readings appointed for Ascension Day itself are curious enough. The scene from the Gospel of Luke shows Jesus leading his disciples out from Jerusalem as far as Bethany, "lifting up his hands, blessing them," and while he's blessing them, he's "carried up into heaven" [Luke 24:51-52]. The Book of Acts, probably also written by Luke, is more dramatically descriptive. In this scene, Jesus tells his disciples: "...you will be my witnesses... to the ends of the earth." And as they're watching, he's "lifted up, and a cloud [takes] him out of their sight." And suddenly two men in white robes appear and say to them: "Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" [Acts 1:8-10].

Which leads me to wonder all the more, What in heaven's name *is* Ascension all about? And what can it mean for us back here on earth?

## I

One recent discovery I've made that's helped me appreciate what Jesus' Ascension can mean for us back here on earth is an excerpt from a quirky little short story by Anton Chekhov. This story, titled "The Privy

Councilor," is about an odd uncle. He's a brother of the young narrator's mother, supposedly some kind of military general, and he arranges to spend a summer with the family at their home. The passage that speaks to me about today comes after supper one evening. The family and others with them retire to a sitting area. The wife of the family's steward quietly takes up her knitting. The odd uncle "[keeps] his eyes fixed on her fingers and chat[s] away without ceasing." But in the midst of his chattering, he says these words: "Make all the haste you can to live, my friends... God forbid you should sacrifice the present for the future! There is youth, health, fire in the present; the future is smoke and deception! ...begin to live."

Odd uncle's observation goes to the heart of what Jesus' Ascension is all about. Strange as the Bible scenes of the Ascension may seem, their meaning is basic. You can sum it up in two points.

First: Our future—our ultimate future—is *not* smoke and deception. Jesus' Ascension, his return to heaven, means that he takes with him his humanity—which is our humanity—and so reserves a place in heaven for us. This is the point he emphasizes in his prayer to God that's today's gospel passage: "Father," he prays, "I desire that those... whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory..." This same assurance rings out from the most requested, most beloved of all the gospel readings for funerals: "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places," Jesus promises. "If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also" [John 14:2-3]. Jesus' Ascension to heaven

reserves a place in heaven, reserves a future in heaven, for anyone who truly wants to be there.

The second point brings us solidly down to earth, squarely into the present. And here's where odd uncle was right on target: "God forbid you should sacrifice the present for the future!" Jesus himself makes that very point as he prays for his disciples—those first followers and us—in his prayer to God that's today's gospel passage. He prays for us because the earthly ministry that was once his is now ours. His Ascension is his handoff to us. All that he did and stood for is now ours to carry forward. And the Holy Spirit is right here to nudge and guide us every step of the way. Yes, "God forbid [we] should sacrifice the present for the future! There *is* youth, health, fire in the present," *and* our future is assured. And so, the outcome of Jesus' Ascension is that we truly can "begin to live" right now.

## II

**H**ow appropriate, then, that right now at this service on this Sunday after Ascension Day, just before we share the Peace, we'll recognize particular people who've committed not to sacrifice the present for the future. These are people who know "there is youth, health, fire in the present" *and* who know the future is assured—people who are determined each day to "begin to live" right now.

- We'll commission newly trained Stephen Ministers. Their ministry is one of Christian caring and friendship for people in any situation of need.
- We'll thank Dave Smith for his leadership of our Journey in Faith program. He's worked with fellow adults exploring the essentials of what we as Christians believe and how we're called to live.
- We'll applaud four adults and seven teenagers whose exploring has led them to take the step of

confirmation or of reaffirming their baptismal vows. These are people who've resolved to activate in their lives now the vows of faith taken for them at their baptisms. (And by the way, the seven teenagers—they were confirmed this past Thursday on Ascension Day itself).

- We'll also express our gratitude to the leaders of our youth ministries. These adults give untold hours to supporting, guiding, sometimes gently admonishing young people along the Journey to Adulthood. Some of these adults have ventured out on pilgrimages far from home—some next year, for the first time, will venture out on pilgrimages far from home—and all so that they and the teens together may seek and find God in new and old ways.

All these special people we'll soon recognize model the earthly ministries that Jesus himself, at his Ascension, handed off to us. They remind us that we should never, ever underestimate the "youth, health, fire" of God's spirit working through us right now, even if in the littlest of ways.

Which reminds me of another moment in Chekhov's quirky little short story. No sooner does odd uncle make his observation about not sacrificing the present for the future, than steward's wife drops one of her knitting needles. Uncle is right there: he jumps up, picks up the needle, and he hands it to her—as the writer notes, "with a bow."

Jesus' Ascension means just this: We honor and rejoice in the blessed humanity of one another, even in the littlest of ways, right now and "with a bow."

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