

## EASTER VII/ASCENSION

*While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "People of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." Acts 1:10*

This is one of my favorite scenes in Scripture. When I began seminary, in 1979, if you had asked me—if you had been old enough to talk then—if you had asked me my favorite sayings or scenes from the Bible I would have been hard pressed to name any. Or I might have said something like *God is Love* that I don't think is in the Bible at all.

And then, as I progressed through seminary and my most radical feminist theological phase, I might have said we really need to throw the Bible out: it's so sexist and violent and generally fantastical that it's an impediment to faith.

But after all these years of studying and preaching and teaching, I find myself saying, more and more, *this is one of my favorites*. I find more and more to love about Scripture, and I'm glad of that.

One thing that's happened is that my two vocations, first as scholar of English literature, then as priest, have converged more and more. I've learned to study and appreciate the Bible as I would any great work of literature: as an expression of human and divine truths too profound to be conveyed through accurate fact and logic alone.

For example, we can read statistics and history about the conditions of workhouses and the legal system in 19<sup>th</sup> Century London, or we can read

**Oliver Twist** and **Bleak House**. We can read systematic theology and popular psychology, or (and) we can read the Bible. Of course these are not mutually exclusive endeavors.

But most of you are more likely to hear and read, at least, our weekly lectionary passages from Scripture than you are to read Karl Barth, I think, and so it's my job, and my pleasure, to try to connect these passages with life as we live and understand it today. And in the process, I hope to help you love the Bible, (some of it anyway) as I have learned to do.

And here we have the drama of the Ascension. Jesus makes one of his many farewell speeches, and then is lifted up and out of sight, obscured by a cloud. And the disciples, caught, as so often, in mid-stupifaction, stand looking up at the sky where their leader has disappeared. And the angels appear to say, *hey, people, why are you staring up in the sky?*

In one anonymous medieval painting, the disciples are gathered at the bottom, all looking upward at two dark blobs hanging down from the top of the print. You can't see the rest of him, only his two feet hanging down from the clouds. And Salvador Dali decided to paint the Ascension from the disciples' point of view as they are watching Jesus rise. So the only thing you really see is the bottom of Jesus' feet.

Jesus has— as we say in Maine when people have died—Jesus has *gone up*. And he has promised that the Holy Spirit will come upon the disciples so that their work can and will continue. So why are they looking heavenwards?

But don't we all do this, sometimes? Don't we all cast our gaze heavenward, at least mentally, metaphorically, asking God to intervene from

above and make things better, solve a problem, do the work that needs doing?

I read, and perhaps some of you did as well, in a recent *New Yorker*, (May 30, 2011) a sad and compelling story entitled *God Knows Where I Am* about a woman, Linda, who refused her diagnosis of schizophrenia or schizoaffective disorder. Like many with such an illness, she believed certain of her thoughts were coming from elsewhere, in particular, from God. Also like many de-institutionalized mental patients, she drifted between homeless shelters, hospitals, and jails. Eventually, one early October she broke into an unoccupied house and made it her temporary home, deciding to subsist on apples while “awaiting further instructions” from God.

Linda stockpiled apples from the nearby orchard. She also kept journals faithfully, and the more she was off her medication the more she lapsed into religious reveries and saw everyday occurrences as signs from God. She had faith in God’s plans for her, and wrote, in December, “my death at this point does not seem beneficial to God’s plans as perceived by me.” She worried that Satan’s workers could be waiting for her. “Dear God,” she wrote, “Please save me. I’m trying but don’t know what to do. Amen. “

On December 5, Linda ate her last apple. On January 13, she died.

She left a letter for whoever would find her body, explaining that her death would be the result of domestic violence. “I talked with and wrote to many people in position of authority about this—but no one helped me.” She asked to be buried in the cemetery of the town where she had lived when her daughter was a child, and requested, “Jesus take me home.”

Now, Linda had a mental illness, she lacked insight about her condition, and refused her medications. She abandoned her daughter, avoided her sister, who became her legal guardian, and resented anyone who tried to interfere in her life. She relied on God to save her, and, by her lights, God failed.

But plenty of people tried to help her. Psychiatrists, social workers, nurses, community social services. And mostly her sister and her daughter. But she regarded them with paranoid suspicion, treated them cruelly, and rejected all help from human sources.

Linda kept staring heavenward, looking for help from God. But to her that help would be very specific, understood only on her own terms, and did not involve human intervention, the work of human hands.

We are not Lindas, thank God. But we do all sometimes share her tendency to imagine or proscribe help from God entirely in our own terms, and with careless disregard for those around us who love and care for us, those who are God's heart and hands in this, our world, those who do the work of the Risen Christ and the Holy Spirit in our midst.

Let's not be Lindas. Let's not be those misdirected disciples, gazing into a cloud. Let's find God in this world, our world, and rejoice. Alleluia!  
Amen

