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Given at Christ Church Quaker Farms, Oxford, CT

Acts 1:6-14; Psalm 68:1-10, 33-36; **1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11**; John 17:1-11

“Beloved, do not be surprised at the ... ordeal that is taking place among you... as though something strange were happening to you.” †

I can certainly relate to that, and I suspect most of us can! “As though something strange were happening to you...” we have all, at some time or another, faced challenges and ordeals that seem to be surreal. I always thought it hard for most of us to identify with the degree of suffering, the level of persecution that 1st Peter is addressing—referring to the struggles of Christians in 1st Century Greco-Roman society... that is until the last few months! It seems the world is upside down and everywhere there’s hardship and suffering, definitely strange and surreal. So, 1st Peter speaks to us today, just as it did back then.

This Sunday we celebrate one of the ‘great feasts’ of the Church, the Ascension of Christ—which the Apostolic Church held up as proof of the divine veneration of Jesus. Similar to the famous prophets of old (Moses, Elijah, Isaiah) who ascended to the heavens, Jesus is taken up to sit at the Father’s right hand in glory. We are called to recognize the divinity and majesty of God’s chosen one, of his Son. Today, I want to reflect on three specific points, sparked by 1st Peter and the farewell discourse of John’s Gospel, that I think help us understand what the Ascension means for us:

- 1) We are a pilgrim people... on a journey... and as with every journey, we must leave something behind.
- 2) This letting go is hard and involves suffering and brokenness.
- 3) Despite this, God is present and never leaves us.

The 1st point, you’ve heard me say it before, we are a ‘pilgrim people.’ As such, we are on a journey, a spiritual pilgrimage, a journey of growth. We are only on this Earth for a short time. This journey necessarily involves movement and change, and letting go, leaving something behind. Jesus’ Ascension, his departure from his beloved disciples, is *a model* for all of us on pilgrimage of the importance of ‘moving on’ and not dwelling in the past. The temptation is to hold onto the present, to grasp at what is ‘here and now,’ to try to keep things status quo. And yet the world is always evolving, and we must adjust and move forward in order to flourish. And moving forward is also about *love*. Jesus, though he has been raised to glory with the Father in heaven, still intercedes for us and is concerned about us, because he loves us. Jesus, who knows the temptations and the difficulties of being human, asks the Father in his farewell discourse in John, “May those you have given me be with me to see my glory... that the love with which you have loved me may be in them and I in them.” *May your love be in them.* A wonderful analogy devised by a sixth century Desert Father, Dorotheus of Gaza, reminds us that our love of God and our love of other people is closely linked, so much so that it is impossible to love God and have contempt for anyone.

He describes a great circle, with a point in the middle and lines extending from the middle point out to the edges of the circle. For you geometry folks, he describes a circle with radii extending equally from the center point to the outer circumference (like a bicycle wheel and its spokes). The *circle*, in its full circumference, represents the *world*... and the *center* point, represents *God*. The *straight lines*, or radii, which extend from the outer circumference of the circle to the middle, represent the *lives of humans*, all of us.

Notice, as we move about in our lives... the closer we move in toward God at the center, the closer we become to one another. And the closer we move toward one another, the closer we move toward God. Similarly, the farther we move away from others and isolate ourselves out at the edges of the world, the farther we move away from God. (*Bondi, R. *To Love as God Loves*, p. 25).

The 2nd point I want to make is that moving along in our journey involves ‘letting go,’ which is hard. And although God comes to us in the fellowship we share and good times, God also comes to us in brokenness. Suffering is a natural part of life in this world. “Beloved... do not be surprised by the ordeal taking place... as though something strange were happening to you.” 1st Peter reminds us to be strong and also to be humble before God. It’s not about trying to ‘save ourselves’ or to trying to ‘fix’ our lives. The message is: let go and *trust in God*. We are to cast away our fears and place them in God’s hands. ‘Cast all your anxiety on Him.’ I love that line—‘cast all your anxiety on Him.’ That is especially hard to do when we’re suffering, when we’re losing the things that seem so important to us, perhaps even a part of ourselves. Whether it’s the loss of our jobs, or our capacity to do those things we used to do because of physical or mental afflictions, or aging. Or whether it’s the loss of those we hold dear, the loss of those we love. Like the apostles, we are told to ‘cast our anxiety on Him, because he cares for us.’ In the Church today there is great *diversity* among God’s people, just as there was back in the first Century. And while there is often great pain and suffering caused by the differences among us, there is also great comfort and fellowship when we witness of the presence of God among us and in us. “That they may be one, as we are one.”

As Christians, our *oneness* is what allows us to face diversity. Our growth together in corporate worship inspires our private prayer, our private reflection, and our individual actions in the world. Our *oneness* in Christ allows us to recognize the importance of our relationships with others in the world (as with Dorotheus’ example). The importance of our relationships not just with other Christians, but with people of all faiths— Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and so many other faiths. Theologically, the *differences* in humanity are what allow us to recognize our *similarities*, and what we share in common. Those various differences between us help us to recognize the *image of God* in the face of those who may not seem to be like our own image... the *oneness* that binds us together as God’s children.

This is what is meant by ‘The Glory of God’ in today’s scriptures. And what the “coming of the Holy Spirit” at Pentecost is all about. Eternal Life and salvation are finding God, by recognizing God’s presence in the world around us!

Finally, the 3rd reflection I want to share is on *God’s love*. The Ascension is really all about God’s love, and, as we come to see through Pentecost, God never actually leaves.

One of my favorite Latin anthems, or canticles, one I have known since I was a child, one that I sang with friends in college, in various monasteries around the world, while a student in seminary, and at my ordination, is— *'Ubi caritas et amor... Deus ibi est.'*

Ubi caritas... 'where there is charity (love),

Deus ibi est... 'there is God.'

Ubi caritas... 'wherever love may be found,'

Deus ibi est... 'there God is.'

Wherever there is love, there is God!

God is present among us as a people wherever we share that love. When, as a community, we gather together in prayer, when we work together for good, *wherever and whenever we love*, there is God. God has not abandoned us; we do not suffer alone. We are the Body of Christ and Christ cares for us, always, because he loves us.

I hope these the points of reflection help to explain what the Ascension means for us today— First, we are a pilgrim people on a journey and we, like Jesus and the disciples, must 'let go' of some things, even things that are dear to us. Second, this involves suffering and brokenness, but God is still present in the brokenness. And finally, where there is love, there is God; we are never alone.

As we come to the altar today, let's remember that we are, none of us, alone. We'll be reminded in the breaking of the bread, that God is present *even in things that are broken*, even in *our* brokenness. That God is always present in our fellowship together and whenever we love, for wherever there is love, there is God. *'Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est! †*