

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

Today is one of those Sundays when it seems like everything is happening at once.

This is the Sunday that both ends the Easter season

and takes up the slack

for the expectation that few people will show up, even virtually,

on a Thursday to celebrate Ascension Day.

Since we get to hear the ascension story from Acts again today,

I think I'll take the opportunity to share with you

a bit about why the Ascension

is such an important part that makes up our faith.

Perhaps it might even drum up enough interest

for there to be a great hew and cry

for a service next year!

(Hey, I can dream can't I?)

What is so important about the ascension?

It is an important, often missed fact, to remember

that it is the body of Jesus,

still marked with the wounds that came from living a mortal life,

that ascends into heaven to be incorporated into the being of God.

Not the spirit of Jesus, or the soul of Jesus, but the body of Jesus.

By this action God is changed.

Forever more, the human body becomes a part of the one true and living God.

The human condition,

with all its shortcomings and limits,

has become holy.

To be sure, this does not mean that everything that humans do is holy,

but it does mean that when we come before God, as we do every week,

to plead our case and ask for a blessing on our endeavors,
or forgiveness for our sins,
God knows where we are coming from,
indeed can remember where we are coming from.

But God is not the only one changed by the Ascension.

We as human beings are changed as well.

The Ascension not only changes how we interact with God,
it changes how we interact with each other.

You see, it is the theology of the Ascension
that lies at the root of why we value human life
above the life of all of God's other creatures.

It is this understanding of the holiness of the human condition
that compels us in our baptismal covenant
to "strive for justice and peace among all people,
and respect the dignity of every human being."

Every human being, whether they are Christian or not.

It is this new reality
that works to push us beyond the normal tribal groupings
that are so much a part of human history.

Ever since the beginning of time,
groups of humans have banded together to survive.

If you were in the group you were defended by the group
and you shared your gifts and talents with the group,
but only with the group.

If you were not in the group, you were out in the cold.

When Christianity is doing it right
it isn't about sorting the world into who's in and who's out.
Everybody's in.

When Christianity is doing it right

it's really more about telling everybody that they're in.
And you thought the Ascension was just about Jesus flying around on a cloud!
Now, I know what some of you are thinking,
because to be fair,
part of me is thinking it myself.

“Wait a minute, what about all the rules, and the commandments?”

“And everybody doesn't really mean everybody does it?”

“What if they don't believe in Jesus?”

And here is where it gets tough.

Because we have to fight against our history.

Everybody does mean everybody.

Even the jerks.

Even those who don't believe.

“So are you saying it doesn't matter if we believe?”

“That Christianity is no better than any other religion?”

One of the things that we say in the church

is that the power to believe comes to us through grace.

It is a God given power and not something we do on our own.

It is the Spirit working in us and through us.

It is not something that we know or can teach.

There is a big difference between knowing and believing.

Knowing is all about studying and learning.

Believing is about faith.

And so the reality is we may never know for sure in this life

if Christianity is the right religion,

even though we may believe passionately, like I do,

that Christianity *is* the right religion.

Don't get me wrong; Knowledge is important.

It supports belief in many valuable ways,

but it can only take you so far.

Belief is a gift of grace from God.

St. Paul tells us, No one can say I believe unless the Spirit tells them.

So, if this is truly the case,

 why do we seek after belief for ourselves

 and work so hard to invite others to believe?

Well, there are two somewhat conflicting *traditions* in the church.

Both are supportable by scripture.

Both are right, though as often happens, neither is completely right.

At the root of one of the traditions

 is a deeper awareness of all that separates us from God –

 that is sin on our side of the divide,

 and the unknowable mystery of the almighty on God's side.

This tradition stresses the transcendence of God.

Our response to this awareness

 is to attempt through appropriate prayers and actions

 to be made temporarily “right enough”

 to approach God and beg for mercy –

 for forgiveness of our sins.

In the world view of this tradition,

 the work of the church is about doing Gods work

 in an effort to make the world a better place,

 but really it mostly involves trying to fix our own mistakes.

Evangelism in this view, is about recruiting the army of God,

 turning people away from the “dark side.”

In this tradition generally if you're not for us you're against us

 and so there is a more pessimistic view of non-Christians.

Now, on the other hand, at the root of the other tradition

 is the awareness of all that God has done, and continues to do *for* us

regardless of our worth –

the gift of life, the forgiveness of sin,

the gate to eternal life, the gift of creation,

in short, the super-abundance of God.

This tradition stresses the intimacy of God.

Our response to this awareness is radical joy and new vision.

The work of the church in this view, is all about *sharing* this new reality
and evangelism loses a lot of its edge,

no longer turning people away from the “dark side,”

but turning on the lights

so people can see the new reality around them.

In this tradition, non believers are more to be pitied than censured.

As I said before, both of these traditions are found in the church.

Both are supported by scripture.

Neither is wholly right, nor wholly wrong.

It is for us as Episcopalians to use our God given reason

to struggle and find when and how each is to be applied appropriately.

With this struggle doubts often arise

and we may find ourselves thinking that we don't believe,

forgetting that doubt is the natural companion of belief.

Remember the old saw, “Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief!”

No, it is important to remember that the enemy of belief is not doubt, it is fear,
something very different from doubt.

Fear stops movement, dulls creativity, and inhibits thought,

while doubts encourage thought, stimulate creativity,

and goad us into change.

If you have doubts that Christianity is the right religion,

I think that might be a good thing.

It's good because it invites you, indeed forces you to dig in,

examining your faith, and in the process strengthening it.

So... what of those who have not been given the grace to believe what I believe?

To that end... I offer some things I wonder about.

✠

Why would God leave the Jews behind now,

after all those thousands of years of Hesed, Loving-kindness?

If God hasn't left them behind, why does it feel that way to us?

✠

What if we didn't actually get everything right

when Jesus came down from heaven?

We make mistakes all the time.

It certainly wouldn't be our first time.

What then if God decided to try again with another prophet?

God certainly doesn't give up easily, why not another prophet?

What if that prophet just happened to be named Mohammad?

✠

Could they be right, and I be wrong?

Could we all be right? All wrong?

These are some of the doubts that come with honest faith,

at least honest Christian faith,

that impel us to the actions,

that keep our faith alive and growing.

Lord I believe. Help my unbelief.

What is God going to do with the Jews, and Muslims,

the Buddhists, and Shintoists

and so on, and so on?

I don't know about you,

but I have enough to worry about with my own problems.

I'm perfectly happy to let God take care of the rest of creation.

I will go on sharing my joy, and the faith I have been given.

And I will share it abundantly.

That is what I believe God is calling *me* to do.

I am perfectly willing to let God handle the rest –

I believe God has given ample evidence of being quite capable in that respect.

Amen.