

Living in the both/and
Seventh Sunday after Easter (Ascension)

If I were to do something totally different and make this an interactive sermon and if I were to ask you all what last Thursday was you might come up with some really good answers. You might say that last Thursday was May first, May Day, some folks might think themselves to be really clever, reveal their age and say that it was, “law day,” if you are younger you might remember the first of May as the day just last year that there was a “melee” in Los Angeles because of the response by the Los Angeles Police Department to a pro-immigration rally which was being held. And all of those things are correct. As a matter of fact there are probably any number of correct responses to the question of what last Thursday, May the first was. If you go to Wikipedia you will discover seven pages of things that happened, as in births and deaths, or are commemorated, as in the feast days of seven Saints, or that go down in history in varying degrees of importance, depending on your bent in life. So anything you answered in your mind for what was significant about last Thursday was certainly correct, but perhaps not the thing I was looking for. Probably not too many people, but certainly some, immediately thought, “last Thursday was the Feast of the Ascension – Duh!” I might add that the feast of the Ascension is not listed in the seven page compilation of important things to know about May the first on Wikipedia, not because those who are involved in updating Wikipedia are non-Christian, or don’t find the feast of the Ascension worth noting, but because it is a moveable feast, it is forty days after Easter, and since Easter moves from year to year so does Ascension, and Pentecost, which, for the record, is next Sunday, fifty days after Easter.

The feast of the Ascension in the past in many ways had a higher focus in the life and worship of the Church. As a matter of fact, until the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, there was a season, brief though it was, named Ascensiontide. The paschal candle was extinguished after the Gospel in acknowledgement of the fact that Jesus had returned to his Father in Heaven. The Ascension of Jesus is one of the Scriptural events in the life of Jesus that can cause the 21st century mind, which demands facts and proof, to be somewhat uneasy. It has certainly been an event which has garnered much attention over the centuries. It is one of the scenes more frequently depicted in art throughout the ages. One of my favorite depictions is by a late 15th early 16th century artist named, Hans Suess von Kulmbach in which the disciples and one woman are gathered in a circle below a fluffy white cloud from which the lower robe and chubby white feet of Jesus are dangling, not really dangling, more like the first position of ballet if you can envision that. One can almost imagine the hands of God reaching securely under Jesus’ arms, holding him there steady for just a few

more moments so the group below can fully take in the scene before he is whisked to his rightful place with God. The looks on the faces of the gathered group are mixed between awe and puzzlement, a mixed bag that we can certainly relate to. Some of them quite frankly look as though they are not quite sure what to do with this.

It is forty days after the resurrection and as we can only imagine it was a whirlwind of a forty days. Jesus is gone, then he's back, he's walking through doors, appearing in rooms, but not a ghost. He's walking along roads with disciples, he's eating fish and he has those scars on his hands and side. He's the same but he's not. He was back with them but now he is going again. It is all so confusing, so uncertain. He has promised to be with them even to the end of the ages but he's leaving. He has promised to send an advocate, a comforter, to be with them and he tells them to stay and wait. He didn't tell them for how long, or how they would know that the waiting was over. (but as we know- *as they knew*... there is nothing like having tongues of fire come on you to let you know it's time to get moving... but that's for next week). In the meantime there is uncertainty, there is waiting, something with which some of us are most uncomfortable. But that is what we are called to do right now, to wait, to trust, to live in the in-between time.

We don't live in a world that encourages waiting in any way. We also don't live in a world that is comfortable with the unknown, the uncertain. On a daily basis we are able, in the blink of an eye, to have access to more information than we could process in multiple lifetimes. We are able to speak to anyone at any moment no matter where the individual is or what he or she is doing. We become frustrated if we leave a voicemail message and it is not responded to in what we deem is an appropriate turn-around time. All of this is not to say that we are more communicative. We are not. We are, if possible, even less communicative. Communication, on some level, must require an interchange, but that is not what we're about. In this day and age we are not interested in conversation, we are interested in imparting a bit of information. We just want you to know something, we don't have time to converse, or we don't want the interchange of ideas. Some of us remember a time before PCs. Some of us remember a time before text messages, even cell phones.... even answering machines. Life was tedious then, wasn't it? It required trying as many times as you had to in order to get in touch with someone. It required conversation. There were not instant answers. We were required to wait.

Not only can the waiting, the being on hold as it were, be somewhat unnerving to us but the order of our readings for today is also a bit unsettling. First we heard from the Acts of the Apostles of an event that took place after the resurrection of Christ, forty days after Easter. Then, later, in the Gospel, we are brought into what is frequently referred to as the farewell address of Christ,

which took place prior to the crucifixion. It's the both/and. It's almost as if we enter into God-time, time that is not fixed on the clock, or even on the calendar as we know it, a time in which all that was and is and is to be is somehow encapsulated into one – again something that unnerves our need for order- our order, for timeliness-our timeliness.

The disciples who witnessed the Ascension of Christ were told to wait, to live in the unknown, in the both/and- both “I will be with you until the end of the ages,” and “I will send an Advocate to be with you,” both “the kingdom of God has come near you” and “your kingdom come,” both “in the world, but not of the world.”

We don't want that. We don't like living in the both/and in the now but not now, the in the world but not of it, or do we? The most popular commercial on television in the country right now is one titled “Maybe.” It's Nike's post modern Michael Jordan in a monologue lining out all the accusations made against him, (and I'm paraphrasing here) things like, “maybe I didn't tell you how much I had to work to be a star athlete,” “maybe I took the focus away from the game.” He lines out all the accusations that have been made against him then the ad closes with him saying, “Maybe you are just making excuses.” Another popular ad is for G2 the second generation of Gatorade, which boasts of low calories and high motivation. It seems to me that we are truly at this point in time, on all sorts of levels, living in the both/and. If you follow fashion you will find that you can wear whatever you want- just make a statement- hems short, hems long, skirts full, skirts straight, adds some buttons, unless you don't want. It seems that we are beginning to live, at least on a cultural level into the both/and.

But can we as Christians? Can we live in this time that expects us to wait, not just until Pentecost, which will be next Sunday, but until the return of Christ, or until the Kingdom of God is truly and fully here and now? And, what does that living in the both/and mean for Christians? It means the same thing for us as it did for the disciples that day so long ago, whether they actually witnessed dangling feet, or nothing more than the fact that Jesus was there one minute and gone the next. It means trusting, referring back to the word and example of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and doing our best to be faithful followers of his word and example on a daily basis.

Lord, be with us until the end of the ages so that we may be with you. Amen.