

Binkley Baptist Church

“The Church of the Ascension”

by The Rev. Dr. Marcus McFaul

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Vespers for Ascension

On a recent trip to New York City, we saw in Greenwich Village the Episcopal Church of the Ascension. The folks with me noted that they weren't aware of many churches with that name, “Ascension.” There are many churches named for various Christian doctrines and/or festivals, such as “Church of the Resurrection,” and “Trinity Church.” You can locate plenty of Holy Spirit places depicting Pentecost, a few Churches of the Incarnation but not too many Ascension ones. As the go-to-guy-on-things-religious they asked, “Marcus, why is that?” Followed quickly by, “And what in the world is Ascension anyway?” I hate having to work on vacation. But it did get me to thinking about what any church named Church of the Ascension would emphasize in its mission and ministries, though. I mean, if your church is Church of the Incarnation, the expectation is one that embodies and incarnates divine love (putting skin on). The Church of the Holy Trinity (God in three persons; Creator, Christ, Spirit) would stress the trio virtues known as faith, hope, and love.

Church of the Resurrection—I lived near one of these in Kansas City, largest Methodist Church in the Midwest, its emphasis is on ministries of new life, evangelism, and conversion.

But Ascension?

Ascension—which is actually this Thursday—finds Jesus leaving, up, up, and away Jesus goes. He leaves. Well, lots of folks are leaving church these days so perhaps Church of the Ascension is appropriate! Remember that Pew Research report from last year? Fewer and fewer folk are wanting to be identified as “Christian,” and folks are leaving the back door of a church at a much faster rate than folks entering the front. Hmm.

Now the only one of the four gospel writers who gives us this story of Jesus floating up to the heavens is Luke—it is at the end of his gospel story and at the beginning of his companion piece that tells the story of the Church, Acts.

As Luke tells it, the disciples ask Jesus:

“Lord, is this the time you'll restore the Kingdom to Israel (Acts 1)”

In essence, they need to know if they can wait and remain in Jerusalem to see the power of God come upon them.

Yes, says Jesus, power from the Holy Spirit will soon arrive and it will be an “a-sending” power—sending them out to places and people beyond Jerusalem, such as Samaria, Judea, indeed the world over, empowered with a message of transformation and of hope. Not only heavenly hope, but hope for the here and now.

“When he has said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up and a cloud took him out of the sight—while he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, two white-robed men said: *WHY DO YOU STAND LOOKING UP INTO HEAVEN?*”

Well, because it's a strange sight, that's why!

There's powerful mythic imagery going on here; a three tiered understanding of the world—

Heaven above

Earth here

Hell below.

Time doesn't allow for a comprehensive critique or examination of that idea!

What isn't up for dispute is that the main questions of Ascension remain: Where is Jesus? Where will we find Christ at this very moment?

Anthony Mello tells this story:

*There was once a woman who was religious and devout and filled with love for God. Each morning she would go to church. And on her way children would call out to her, beggars would accost her, but so immersed was she in her devotions that she did not even see them. Now one day she walked down the street in her customary manner and arrived at the church just in time for the service. She pushed the door, but it would not open. She pushed it again harder and found that the door was locked. Distressed at the thought that she would miss service for the first time in years and not knowing what to do, she looked up. And there, right before her face, she found a note pinned to the door. It said, “I'm out there!”*

“I'm out there!” Jesus is out there. Right in front of our faces.

That's where we should look—not gazing up into the heavens or even worse navel-gazing (so consumed with ourselves to the neglect of others)—to find Jesus out on the streets, in the homeless shelters, in the refugee camps, on death row.

This is the great adventure of the Christian journey; to be open and ready to meet all kinds of folks, those once considered unclean and unworthy of grace and acceptance. The vision of any Church of the Ascension is that its members look all around (up, down, and all around) to see anyone who needs healing, mending, and blessing.

The Church of the Ascension gets out there finding God in surprising places and faces.

To be sure it meets inside a sanctuary (just like ours tonight) to worship the risen and ascended Christ, to praise and pray, to sing and say beautiful music and liturgy, but it eventually must move outdoors:

To advocate for fairer immigration policies and to resist the demonization of the other, be they Syrian refugees or transgendered persons. To witness through lobbying that the right of all to vote be taken seriously and that all roadblocks to voting be dismantled.

The Church of the Ascension doesn't sit around and moan about its loss of cultural privilege and then make-up stories of persecution in order to gin up anger against our Muslim friends or any other group of Americans;

The Church of the Ascension keeps getting out into the world day after day to feed God's children, to call unjust all systems (political, financial, and theological) that foster hatred against ANYONE for being who they are.

The Church of the Ascension is not so heavenly minded so as to be of no earthly good; it doesn't twiddle its ecclesial thumbs and wait around for someone to rescue it with high-minded, esoteric solutions. It gets out there.

If you found a church that was all of that and more—it might feel like you had ascended into heaven, only to soon realize that their mission statement has something in it that says, "thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Thanks to God. Amen. And Amen.