

Grounding the Ascension

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Seventh Sunday of Easter

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“You’re grounded!” – have you ever heard or spoken those words before? – I imagine most all of us have been on either or both ends of those words: clearly a case in which it is better to give than to receive! We all know what that means – a punishment, or as us baby-boomer parents like to say, a consequence, that means you are restricted in your activities – banished to your room or confined to the house depending on the age and situation. But, “you’re grounded” could mean other things too – being grounded can be a good thing when used in another way: when you describe someone as a grounded person, that’s a compliment, right? – someone with admirable convictions, rooted in wisdom – ‘you’re a really grounded person – I respect that’. It’s good to be grounded in that case. As a person who enjoys words, it’s interesting to see where ‘you’re grounded’ leads when you play around with it...

It is kind of a quirky little idiom, isn’t it, to say something is “grounded”...? What does that mean for a punishment/CONSEQUENCE?...I suppose literally that someone is stuck to a certain patch of ground on God’s good earth, not to venture beyond the immediate grounds – interesting. But more interesting yet to think of it when you compliment someone as ‘grounded’ – we are literally saying it is good for someone to have their feet on the ground (that’s another idiom we use as a compliment), to be earth-rooted, to be ground-y...that’s soil, earth, dirt, right? – good to be of the ground. It’s an idea literally rooted in the earth – an earthy, organic sort of attribute: “you’re grounded” – it connects us to the goodness of being connected to this good earth.

So - the Ascension – ‘grounded’ may not be the first word that comes to mind for that story – the ascension story is of Jesus leaving the earth, no longer ground-bound; and the meaning of the ascension, our praise of Christ ascended to the throne of God, does not sound much grounded in

things of this world. I'm not sure what you think of the Ascension or what it means or if you've thought much about it at all, but think if someone heard this story today out of the blue or heard this ascension doctrine as part of our faith – would “grounded” be what that person would think of us?...grounded in real life, grounded even in reality? – perhaps not. Well, I'd like to make a case for grounding the Ascension – not sending it away to its room, but for seeing the story of the ascension grounding us in life, rooting us in reality, connecting us to this good earth and to God's life-nurturing wisdom of how we are to live on it – grounding the Ascension.

So let's start with the ascension story itself – the 2 accounts of the story that Paige read from both Acts and Luke. I wanted us to hear both of those versions – partly simply because I think it's interesting to see the different details included in the different accounts – the kind of thing that happens as a story is told from various perspectives and for particular purposes. But partly too because I wanted to make sure we heard the Acts version –because I think there is one of the crucial moments there that is both profound and entertaining: Jesus has spoken to his followers final words of wisdom and blessing and commission, and then he is mysteriously taken from them, ascended – and we're told Jesus' followers are ‘gazing up toward heaven’ – wondering, gawking, waiting? - what if the story ended there?! – how long would they have stood there?! But messengers appear to say: “why do stand looking toward heaven?” or, in the Gordon-modern-paraphrased-version ‘what are you looking at? – you just gonna stand here? – nothing to see here – move along...’ It strikes me as quite comical – and profound: this story isn't just about or for those followers that day, it is told for the church, for the future followers – Jesus lived, died, rose, ascended...good news! – so, what are you gonna do? - gaze reverently to heaven? Wait around, bide your time? Don't just stand there – move along...the immediate focus following the ascension is back on the ground – grounding Jesus' followers in life. That's what the Luke account of the story picks up on, as Jesus' followers return to Jerusalem – they are filled with joy, and they join in worship at the temple – the Ascension story focuses Jesus' followers back to life on the ground. But if the disciples returning to Jerusalem just to worship and wait for

the gift of the Spirit doesn't yet sound too grounded or realistic to you, I think there's more for us to see of this idea of being grounded in reality as the story of the fledgling followers, the church, continues to unfold.

That story is told in the book of Acts, and in this Eastertide season, I have noted an interesting pattern as the lectionary has gone through stories in the book of Acts – which is that the vocations of various characters are mentioned – their work, their day to day tasks. I noticed it in Acts 9, as we're told of a disciple Dorcas who we're told is devoted to works of charity – well, good, but still pretty religious sounding – except then we're also told of another follower Simon, and it says 'he is a tanner', someone who deals with animal hides –interesting (and a little trivia – Simon is mentioned again twice in chapter 10 – each time it says Simon the Tanner). Then the story of Peter and Cornelius in chapters 10 & 11 makes clear that Cornelius is a centurion – a roman soldier – and by all accounts after his conversion he remains so. Then Acts 16 –we hear about Lydia, a devout worshipper of God who is 'a dealer in purple cloth' we're told. Today, again in Acts 16, a woman trapped in a demeaning life, working to benefit her keepers, and she is released from that bondage (an interesting commentary in itself on work and economy and exploitation), and then the drama with the jailer – all sorts of important things happen in that story, but just notice that we're not even told this man's name, he is just 'the jailer' – and it would seem he remains so too after his conversion. Now perhaps these are just quirky details, but I think it is significant. The story of the early church is not of a group of people standing around looking toward heaven – nor is it the story of some religious elites, or recluses or extremists – it is people involved in the realities of life: real jobs and real relationships, real difficulties and real accomplishments. The story of the church following the ascension is grounded in the lives of ordinary people touched by the extraordinary grace of God in the vagaries of daily life.

That echoes what Pastor Jill spoke to in her sermon last week – Scripture pointing us to find God right at the heart of daily life, both in the grand visions people are a part of and in the ordinary,

less noticed realities of day to day. Both are important – in Acts the ascension story and the gift of the Holy Spirit and the call to bring good news to the nations are important on a grand scale – and so is grounding those stories in Dorcas as a doer of mercy and Simon the Tanner and Cornelius the centurion and Lydia the dealer in purple cloth, and a woman being exploited and a jailer, both freed in their own way. Jesus ascends to ground the good news in real life – the daily drama of following Jesus Christ faithfully.

But just to make sure we've covered all our bases, let's add Revelation to the challenge of grounding the ascension. They are connected, the ascension and revelation – in the Ascension story in Acts, after the messengers say 'don't just stand there', they also say 'Jesus who has been taken up into heaven will return in the same way' ~ and then the Revelation 22 passage today began with the risen and ascended Christ saying 'See, I am coming soon...' This Eastertide has followed a series of Revelation visions of the fulfillment of time, the new creation, summed up here with that promise "I am coming soon", Christ offering the water of life and the tree of life. Well – what is the church to make of these visions? – shall we stand watching and waiting, or predicting and puzzling? The promise of consummation and return and fulfillment has been a mystery and a puzzle from the early days of the church until now, but the ascension story helps direct us in a very particular way. The revelation vision of return and fulfillment is not something to draw us away from the world, but to sustain us, ground us, in the reality of here and now. And that's why too it is important to include and hear all of those verses from Revelation – those words that identify and condemn evil and falsehood too. The kingdom vision does not gloss over the hard realities of this world or the evil in it – there are terrible things that should have no place in life now and will not have place in eternity. But neither can we make Revelation into a theology of us and them as if evil is only in some folks out there. The insidiousness of evil around us and within us makes urgent the work we have to do in the time God gives to us – to match life for us and others more closely to God's way of life.

And to stretch things just a bit, Revelation even has an image that connects us to the day to day work/vocation theme that we see in Acts – Revelation says the job now of the saints is this: to wash our robes – ‘blessed are those who wash their robes’...that they may enter to the tree of life and holy city. So there’s a day to day job to ground you: do your laundry – wash your robes: align yourself with a reality sustained by the water of life and nurtured by the tree of life – that’s our shared task - doing laundry is hard work, sending us into the soiled realities of life – that’s our job.

When we include Revelation it becomes clear that the Ascension is deeply, doubly grounded – we can see the life-giving promises of God in both the past and the future, which grounds us firmly in the present. Don’t just stand there – do what you are to do: your vocation, your service, your relationships, the work of love and forgiveness, the task of reconciliation unity justice – do your job, which is to wash your robes –and if it’s like my house, there’s always more laundry to do!

That’s our job this day – day to day – and doing so may it be always said of people following the risen and ascended Lord – you’re grounded – AMEN.