

Security Check
Seventh Sunday of Easter
Ascension Day
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Text: Acts 1 & Ephesians 1

Expect long lines and delays! – I’m not talking about Tulip Time, combined with Hope College graduation weekend, and Mother’s Day – what I’m talking about is airport travel for the summer: expect long lines and delays, the government is telling us. Security screening is getting even more strict just as there is a shortage of resources to carry out the increased screenings. And all that happening just as we hear reports that the security checks are often ineffective – when undercover teams seek to pass banned items through security, they are successful more often than not. And all that happening while an attack like the horrible incident recently in Belgium shows that violence can happen in the public area of the airport that has little security screening at all.

The goal is security, but it is an elusive quest: our nation’s vernacular for that quest following 9/11 is ‘Homeland Security’. Do you remember the ‘national threat advisory system’ that was in place from Homeland Security for many years following 9/11? – it had the different threat color levels...the low threat level was green – moving higher through blue and yellow and orange and red. But the thing was, the threat level was NEVER low – always up in that orange and red area. And so it was interesting that in 2011, Homeland Security discontinued that color-coded system, but did so with this guidance - here’s what the government website says:

All Americans all share responsibility for the nation's security and should always be aware of the heightened risk of terrorist attack in the United States

In other words: always be afraid! I’m not trying to be flippant about it – but that seems to be the security message: the threat is always there.

In our liturgical year we have come to the story of the Ascension of Christ, as Jesus bodily departs from earth. Sometimes it can be hard to know what to make of this story - but this is how I would like us to try listening to it today: to think of the Ascension story as being about security – specifically, what security is for those who are followers of Jesus Christ, and how that security shapes how we live as followers of Jesus Christ—the Ascension story as a security check.

When you read a story like the Ascension, I think you have to have in mind right away that in it the disciples are starring in one of their classic roles - one we often see in the Gospels – which is that they are clueless! I'm never quite sure if Jesus' followers were actually so consistently off-base or if it is done as a helpful dramatic effect for stories- probably a bit of both. But here's how it goes in this story: Jesus is Risen - he appears to the disciples, promises to send the Holy Spirit – so what do they ask?...“Hey Jesus, NOW are you finally going to put Israel in charge so we can take control and rule all the other nations?...”...one can only imagine Jesus' frustration – this is my liberal paraphrase: “NO – I've been telling you that's NOT what this is all about! Listen again: I will send the Holy Spirit to you – THAT will be your power; and you will be by witnesses, everywhere.” And with that – Jesus is lifted up...the disciples are left standing there, looking clueless again...and now there are 2 figures in white robes to straighten them out – perhaps a flashback to the messengers at the empty tomb?! - ‘don't just stand there' they say, ‘Jesus, has been taken up, and he will return; you can go back to Jerusalem now...’

Perhaps it's unfair to characterize the disciples as clueless – but maybe not if we identify ourselves with them too...because what is happening with this clueless crew, is that the events of the Ascension are actually confronting them with the need for a significant change – and the change is about security: it is the need to have transformed in them the concept of security that has been engrained into them – and I think their engrained understanding of security is one that is very familiar to what has been formed and shaped into our minds and hearts as well.

What could we say is a present day concept of security...? On the one hand it seems to be about withdrawing into safety behind walls - as many barriers, as many levels of protection as possible: security systems in our homes; security screenings at the airport; security walls at the southern border (you can find security walls in Israel too) ; security forces to encircle the nation with protection; even security shields in space for missile defense. A multi-layered security cocoon. And what goes together with walls when it comes to security is might. If we can enforce our force on others – eradicate the violence of those who would harm us – crush the resistance of those who oppose us -then we will be secure. When push comes to shove – best to be the one with the biggest push to shove threats out of the way.

It is remarkable how those 2 ideas of security today – building walls and imposing force on others – how they mirror the Roman empire ruling the world when the Ascension story occurred. Rome was all about simultaneously building walls of protection, while also brutally imposing its will to quell threats to its security. So the disciples were very familiar with this kind of security system – it's the way of the world: walls and might make security right.

It could be easy to lament or criticize or despair such a security approach. But what if this Ascension story isn't telling us so much simply to criticize the security system around us at it is challenging the church not to do, not to be about, the same thing? Remember - what do those clueless disciples ask about? – they want Jesus to tell them when they're going to be in charge! – when they'll have some real power and security! And even as Jesus rejects that idea, those disciples can be a look in the mirror for us on how followers of Jesus are tempted to capitulate to a world-warped view of security.

The church knows about building walls: walls of doctrine used to keep out spiritual threats; dividing the world into who is in and who is out. And the church is familiar with taking the route of power-over as well: did you catch the language from Ephesians?... 'the immeasurable greatness of the power of Jesus Christ – the power of Christ put to work far above all rule and authority and power and dominion – all things under his feet and his body, the church, over all things...'. That is heady sounding stuff, and the church has often embraced those Ephesians images literally: the church's power imposed over others – triumphal, judgmental, influential – seeking its place among the powers of the world.

When I speak of the familiar role of Jesus' clueless disciples, that's not meant to belittle or discount them – after all, these stories were told by Jesus' followers and for his followers – for us. They are an ongoing reminder for us of our tendency to look at our lives through the engrained patterns of our world, rather than with the transforming perspective Jesus gives: the tendency for the walls and powers of our world to warp our faith into their image.

But in fact the Ascension of Jesus is a direct reversal of, a challenge to and rejection of, those security values in the world – a reversal of the very things most engrained within us. The Ascension is in essence the continuation of the incarnation, in that now the Risen Christ will be present through the Holy Spirit – the resurrection Spirit of Christ present in the church, the body of Christ. Which means that our security as

Christians is simply – profoundly – this: the Spirit of the Risen Christ is with us. That's it – that's all - and according to this story, that is everything.

Our security is not about placing ourselves behind doctrinal walls or behind national borders. Our security is not about imposing power on others - domination across national borders or the practice of spiritual superiority. The security we are given is the abiding presence of God's Spirit – the life-giving Spirit of the Risen Christ. And what the Holy Spirit does is empower us not to separate or dominate, but to be a presence – to be agents of God's presence in the world in a particular way: a presence that engages the powers of this world with courage, conviction, hope – a witness to the life-giving ways of the resurrection.

The Ascension story offers a sense of security DIRECTLY at odds with a faith that builds spiritual walls to protect our spiritual turf. The Ascension story gives a sense of security which is DIRECTLY at odds with Homeland Security – be afraid! – and therefore we must protect and dominate. Instead the Risen Christ confronts those engrained assumptions of security that we hold dear – that hold us in fear. To depend on the promise of the Spirit as our security is to believe that there are things more important in this life than death; that we will not let our fears stand in the way of what it takes to be about the ways of compassion and peace and community, of reconciliation and justice and love – the ways of life that are actually what those grand words of Ephesians speak of and calls us to as followers of Jesus.

I think it's actually a good and helpful part of our nature to want to be secure. But what is difficult for us is to trust that we already are secure - because the Spirit of God is with us, and nothing can separate us from the Risen Christ. When we seek security through walls and weapons, through doctrine and judgment, we find instead we are not safe at all - because there is always something more to be afraid of...the threat level is always high.

I cannot fully express to you how difficult this different sense of security, grounded in the Spirit of Life, is for me to hear and follow – for the church to hear and follow – for you to hear and follow; but I can try to express for us how much freedom there is in listening to it: THIS is your security – Jesus Christ has ascended to be with you always; THIS is our triumphal language: God's Spirit of Life is present. That is our security. And in that life-giving presence we are freed beyond walls and weapons and threats, to community and life, courage and hope – that is the power of the Risen Lord, ascended to send the Spirit of life. AMEN.