

Ascension Sunday Sermon, Year B

Lections: Acts 1:1-11; Ps.47; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:46-53

In Mary Gordon's book Temporary Shelter, a young man watches the young woman he loves respond to a group of nuns singing in a nearby convent. "One day as they sneaked into the balcony of the convent chapel he saw that his love was far away from him. Listening to the singing she looked down at him as though from the lit mountain on whose top she stood. From the women's voices rising without effort about everything that made up life, the sounds filtered through the stained glass. He saw her rise up on the breaths of the faceless nuns, rise up and leave him and leave the body that ran and lay on the grass. The body that always did what she told it that could dance and climb, or run behind him....in the chapel she rose up and wanted to leave the body life she had loved, leave him and their life together..."

She was not the only one. Jesus, in the midst of those who loved him, did the same – perhaps more so. That is what we focus on today, the feast of the Ascension, when he rose up and became even more of what he was....

I've been curious about the ascension. Working this year in the EFM group we have come to see how some of the Jewish followers of Christ could consider Jesus a prophet, the new Elijah, for example. In Bruce Chilton's book, Rabbi Jesus, he believes that Jesus was part of a mystical tradition, one that he studied with John the Immerser, the tradition of the chariot. The Jewishness of Jesus is important in understanding some of the symbolic patterns. (Last week when I was with the church school children, none of them believed that he was Jewish). Called Merkabah mysticism this pattern learned as a rabbinical student was inspired by the prophet Ezekial and drew its followers into the deepest contemplation where God's throne was surrounded by angels, seraphim and cherubim. Most important was the fiery chariot which could move in any direction and contained wheels within wheels...It is not a great surprise that the people of Israel needed a chariot even more powerful than the one which the Assyrians had used to defeat them. This contemplative path provides a way in which a mystic can approach the divine throne and be in intimate and personal communion with God. This sought after plane of being separated them from the limitations of the body, much like the Sufi whirling dervishes who approach a mystical state through the movement. Some textual literature would have us believe that Jesus sought out these heavenly secrets, undertaking a journey into the heart of God. A later strand associated this path with the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. The true seeker looks for and embraces the mystical realms.

We could say that we find some ascending of spirit in the midst of an aboriginal healing circles, in the depths of music sung or heard, or in an attentive time in the wilderness. The goal is seeking of and union with God. Ezekial believed that God is ultimate humanness; that Jesus was an archetype of the Ezekial typography is seen also in other mystics. Julian of Norwich found all of God in a hazelnut. Anne Morrow Lindberg in a shell on a beach, poets, writers, deep pray-ers. Jesus' baptism was a time of the whole

mystical realm opening to him. There was a time of the apostle Paul being caught up in the third heaven and also the writer of Revelations. Jesus could look at humanity and see the divine imprint and gave folks an opportunity to live deeply rather than broadly.

So how is this good news for us who struggle to see the divine in the whole? How may we approach heaven? What does all the research mean about Jesus, the Jew, the mystical traditions, the ways we try to grasp an important proclamation like the ascension? Teilhard de Chardin, the priest scientist imagined his cells dissolving more and more into God as he aged. Some days I have moments of release but more often I don't feel very heavenly – just ask me how I felt about having my car towed away twice this week ! Some days I long for transcendence and transformation but don't feel as if I have enough patience or selflessness or peace in the messy tangle of my own life or that of others. But sometimes there is a God teaching me moment, a glimpse of the spirit where love is simply offered and it is enough. Sometimes I remember that I am in love with God and I am willing to be caught up in more than myself, more that I can ever be. I've learned that I am not good without dirt, without a garden, without color, without prayer, without silence, without good and fascinating books. I'm not good without a struggle, without change, without surrender. I sometimes need the singing to let myself go.

Saturday's commitment to the Millennium Development Goals, through the U2charist, is perhaps one way of practicing 'lift=off' a way of being caught up in even more than what we are. This forty foot AIDS banner came from the national church; it was carried into a previous General Synod. It represents the lives of those who have gone on, those who left some space with us. It reminds us of those who need help rising and what our role may be in helping that happen. I hope you can be present at what will be an amazing time.

Ultimately what I say about the ascension doesn't matter; you need to find the deep truth about the life and death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus for yourself. Amen+

The Rev. Dr. Linda Privitera