

Easter 7A 2017, (with Ascension Themes), May 27, 2017, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, Pa., Kurt S. Strause

Several years ago I remember as a young pastor here at Emmanuel I thought it would be a good idea to celebrate the Ascension of Jesus with a church service and maybe a fellowship social afterwards. Very few people came and after a year or two we gave up. Ascension Day always falls on Thursday, 40 days after Easter. The fact that Ascension always falls on a weekday may be part of the problem in observing it in a congregation's life. This past Thursday was Ascension Day and a few churches, though not many, held worship services. So, instead, we transfer some of the emphasis of that important church day to the following Sunday. That's why, for example, our first reading is from the book of Acts telling of Jesus' ascension into heaven. In some places Ascension Day is still observed with more or less emphasis on its religious meaning. The Amish in Lancaster County cease all work on Ascension Day and devote it to a quiet day of family activities. However the Amish in certain districts in Ohio don't observe it. In Germany, Ascension Day is a holiday, with all banks and post-offices and other places of business closed. In some parts of Germany Ascension Day is also Father's Day, or Men's Day. Here the religious aspect is observed hardly at all, as it's more an occasion for groups of men to go on rambles in the park or outdoors drinking lots of beer.

I've pointed it out before but the Ascension of Jesus was regarded as such an important theme to be included in one of the nine stained glass windows here in the church. While we have some of the correspondence between Pastor Sieger, who was the pastor at the time and the one largely responsible for directing the composition and construction of these windows, and the glass company in New Jersey who constructed them, we don't have any that illumine his rationale for picking these particular themes. I often wondered why there isn't a Pentecost window along with Easter and Ascension. Or an Epiphany window along with Christmas?

For those first apostles who witnessed this strange and wondrous event, the Ascension of Jesus must have seemed puzzling and even frightening. Where is he going? Is he going to come back? They gazed up into heaven as he was taken from them. It reminds me of our daughter's little dog, Ellie. Sometimes I'll go out the front door and she'll be sitting there looking at me as I leave like she wants to come too. I'll come back an hour later and there's she'll be, sitting expectantly looking for my return. The disciples needed two angelic visitors to ask them "why do you keep staring into heaven? He'll come back, just like you saw him." In other words, don't worry, you've got things to do. Remember his promises he made to you.

The Ascension of Jesus comprises a critical turning point in his ministry with the disciples. For forty days after his resurrection he appeared among; teaching them, eating with them, convincing them that he indeed was alive, though he had been crucified and died. It was understandable the disciples thought that now would be the time Jesus would restore the kingdom of God to Israel. With death behind him nothing could stop Jesus now, or so they thought. So why not now? But that's not the Father's plan. First they need to receive the Holy Spirit. The ongoing power and presence of the risen Christ, who will accompany the disciples in their mission to spread the good news.

This powerful promise Jesus makes before he ascends is critical. "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses...to the ends of the earth." Jesus speaks, of course, of Pentecost. Ten days later, the Holy Spirit will rush upon the infant church, with tongues of fire and send them out to proclaim the good news. But it's what he says afterwards that's also important, "you will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth."

A witness in a courtroom trial is someone who gives testimony. They testify to the truth of the matter, what they saw with their own eyes or heard directly with their own ears. But there's more. The word Jesus uses, this word "witness," is from the Greek word "martyrion," from which we get the word "martyr." A martyr gives the most powerful and potent type of witness with the most precious possession a person has, their own life. Jesus does not shirk from the possibility that a disciple's witness may come with a great cost. He does not say that our witness to the resurrection will always be easy or that it will always be convenient.

We are reminded once again this week how much being a witness to Jesus might cost. Friday a week ago two bus loads of Egyptian Christians were headed on a pilgrimage to a monastery. They were stopped by armed gunman and 28 were shot and killed. This wasn't a random or indiscriminate attack. They were singled out because they were Christians. The attack was unjust, cruel, barbaric. Christians in Egypt are understandably frightened. But they continue to live as Christians. They continue to go to church, to worship Jesus Christ as Lord, to educate their children and teach them the ways of Christ. And their deaths, though savage and cruel, are and should be a powerful witness to people like ourselves who rarely, if ever, have to face any sort of religious discrimination, let alone brutality.

The kingdom Jesus brings is a hidden kingdom. It is hidden in the cross and in suffering. Its glory is not found in lavish temples; either the temples of religion or the temples of commerce. Rather, the glory of God's kingdom is to be found wherever his children suffer and there are those stooping down to relieve the suffering of others. And Jesus' ascension to the right hand of God is the both the vindication and the fulfillment of this cross-shaped, suffering kingdom. Our witness to Jesus means to enter into his life of service and love for the sake of others, not counting the cost to ourselves. We aren't to calculate whether or not we can afford to be witnesses. Jesus simply tells us that's what we already are. A witness even willing to give one's life, if need be.

It's an easy thing to say, I know, sitting here in a land which guarantees freedom of religious life. We do not experience "the fiery ordeal" which Peter speaks about in our second reading this morning. We again are reminded this Memorial Day weekend that men and women gave their lives as witnesses to the truth that "all men, and women, are created equal," and that equality includes the freedom to believe or not believe as one might choose. But Christians, no matter where they might live, whether it's the United States or Egypt, can never equate government with the Kingdom of God. History teaches us that earthly kingdoms rise and fall, and that times of peace can easily give way to fiery ordeals.

Are we prepared to give that kind of witness with our very lives? I think sometimes it's worth pondering. But until that day we can never really know the answer. What we can know, and trust, are the promises of Jesus which will never leave us. We believe that whenever we pray in his name he is here. We trust that our celebrations of this Holy Communion are done in his presence. We believe that Jesus, ascended to the right hand of the Father, will come again and all people will see his glory. Until that time we are called to give witness to Jesus, here and to the ends of the earth. Amen.