

Remembering With Unceasing Thanks

A Sermon on Luke 24: 44-53
for Ascension / Memorial Sunday, May 28, 2017

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight oh Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.*



When I initially volunteered to preach this Sunday, it hadn't occurred to me that it would be memorial weekend. I knew it would be Ascension Sunday, and I was all excited for that, I just forgot about Memorial Day. I want this service to do justice to both holidays.

You'll have to be the judge as to how I do with that, because I was pretty near clueless as to how to tie the two together. In fact, I spent an

embarrassing amount of time and mental effort trying to figure out how to do this in a way that wasn't forced. I was getting nowhere. Well, I was approaching wit's end.



There are however very obvious connections. On a very basic level, the Gospel lesson this morning, the Ascension story, is about Christ's physical form leaving this world and going into heaven, and then how the disciples responded that. Put that way, it is not so different from our Memorial day efforts to remember and honor our loved ones who have passed away, and especially our war dead.



The unexpected part of the Gospel lesson, well, unless you count the whole being raised up by a cloud bit, the weird part is how the disciples respond. It is also the important part for us this morning. And the disciples respond with worship, joy, more worship, and praise. It's the "joy" part that throws me. And it's not just joy - it is great joy.

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That is not most people's response to the departure of someone you love and respect. Thinking about death, even when someone has lived a long and full life, even when their continued existence in this world is painful, we still want more time with them.

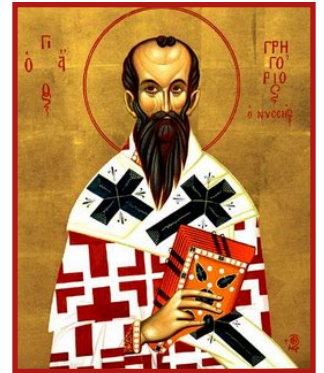
True, as Christians who live in the hope of the resurrection, we believe death doesn't have the last word. As it is usually put, Christ trampled down death by death. We believe then that those we love are not only freed from the pains of this life, but are in the presence of God, in a place of light, a place of refreshment, a place of peace from which every ailment, sorrow, and lamentation are banished... and that we will see one another again.



In practice it is difficult to have translate that into “joy.” It takes a great deal of selflessness to not immediately focus on the “but what about us who are left behind” and just look at what it means for the departed. I know for my own self, when my Dad passed away, what bothered me most was not having him here, and the thought that we may one day be reunited wasn't the greatest comfort since I hopefully have several years to go before that point. Who knows how long medical science is going to have us living, but even if I make it to 80, that is like 60 years I have to go through first without my dad. When you're only 20, that really seems like, about 4 lifetimes. It's a long time to be separated.

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Even the greatest saints of the church struggled with the mystery of death. I'm reminded in particular of Gregory of Nyssa, a 4th century bishop in what would be modern-day Turkey, as his sister, Macrina, was on her deathbed. Macrina kept going on on a theological discourse on the resurrection in an odd attempt to comfort her brother. Gregory though remains inconsolable, even though he is remembered as being incredibly strong in his faith.



The disciples in the gospel today are in a slightly different position in that their Lord already proved to be stronger than death, and prepared them for what was happening next, promising that he wasn't abandoning them, and that the Holy Spirit would come to them. Still, they knew that they were not going to see him with their physical eyes any longer.

As is often the case, the church fathers I'm so fond of turned my attention to aspects of this story that hadn't occurred to me. Bede, the Venerable Bede, an English monk living late 600s, early 700s, had a wonderful explanation here:



Dearly beloved brothers and sisters, we should always remember, especially in this place, our Lord's words as he was glorifying his disciples: "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see." Who is truly capable of describing or of worthily imagining how with blessed sorrow they lowered to earth the eyes with which they had



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looked at him whom the heavens were worshiping as their king? He was now returning to the throne of his Father's glory with the conquered mortal nature that he had taken. How sweet were the tears that they poured out when they were burning with lively hope and gladness over the prospect of their own entry into the heavenly fatherland! They knew that their God and Lord was now bringing there part of their own nature! Such a sight restored them! Then they worshiped in the place where his feet stood.



“What they saw was a way forward. Jesus was carried up into heaven so that he might share the Father's throne even with the flesh that was united to him. The Word made this new pathway for us when he appeared in human form.” - Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on Luke chapter 24.

With that understanding, it is no wonder that it is sometimes said that the whole Gospel is a journey toward the Ascension. What the disciples saw was the point of the whole thing. Christ was one who lived on earth for a reason. And he died for a reason. There was a reason for the resurrection, and there is a reason for the ascension. The whole point was to make life better for the whole of humanity, and give us a path to God. And that was reason enough for him to live the life of sacrifice.



While our servicemen and women don't act on as cosmic of a level, nor are they divine, they are certainly no strangers to the notion of sacrifice. And when faced with the sacrifices these men and women make, often of their own lives, I think we can begin to understand the disciples impulse to stop in the moment, and give thanks and praise as we remember them. They certainly deserve it.

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Now, to the God of all grace,
who calls us to share God's eternal glory
in union with Christ,
be the power forever! **Amen.**

