

June 2, 2019

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Acts 11:1-11; Luke 24:44-53

### **Hard to Believe**

Today we celebrate the church festival day known as “The Ascension of Our Lord.” Just to be sure we don’t miss that, in today’s appointed readings we hear the story of Jesus’ ascension twice. First we heard it as recounted in Acts, and then we heard it again in the gospel reading from Luke. It actually would have made more sense narratively if we had heard Luke first, and then Acts, because Acts is a sequel to Luke, written by the same author, who begins book two with the scene that ended book one. Or if you think about it in terms of television, it’s like Acts begins with an episode from last week and a voiceover, “Previously...” The Ascension links the two books. But even though it’s recounted, twice; even though we heard it today, twice, even though it is reiterated for emphasis and significance to Christian faith—it’s mentioned in the creed, too—still, I think this story is hard to believe. Flat out strange. Miraculous feedings and healings are one thing, but this seems of a different order altogether. Jesus is with his disciples and suddenly he starts being lifted away by a cloud, higher and higher, until he’s completely out of sight? Just goes away, just like that, like a magical cloud ride? It’s not just strange, it begs belief.

This being said, it is tempting to avoid this story twice told—and we could simply skip right over it—and with permission from the church calendar. Technically, Ascension Day was Thursday, occurring, as it does, 40 days after Easter. So we could skip it, mumble through that line in the creed. We could pay little mind to this hard to believe story of Jesus no longer being seen—if it weren’t so easy to believe that Jesus is no longer seen. There’s the rub. Put it that way, and it is easy to believe, so very easy. It sounds incredulous to talk about a three tiered universe in which God takes an invisible elevator up, up, and away, but a world where God is gone? That’s all too believable. It takes very little to accept that story—which feels like reality—that narrative of spiritual absence. That narrative is not just believable, it’s all but universal. We are disenchanted. The world is divinely lacking, theologically bereft. The church is irrelevant. It’s not hard to believe that. It’s much, much harder to believe that the Ascension matters. It’s much harder, and much more crucial, to believe what the Ascension means: that what God does in Jesus makes a difference, all the difference, offers the kind of out-of-this-world hope for which I am desperate, but often doubtful.

Two people of this congregation have made it a little easier for me to believe. These two people worshipped here pretty much every Sunday for decades. Just a few days ago, to our great shock and sadness, they died, one on Monday, another on Tuesday. One after the other, it was hard to believe. But these two people have made it easier for me to believe that Jesus didn’t just live and leave, that there’s more to the story, more to this life, that something about the Son of Man being lifted up, far beyond my understanding, makes all the difference in the world.

This week that we mark the Ascension of Our Lord I am thinking of Marie DaMask. One of my fondest memories of Marie is from the very first Sunday that I came to this church, five and a half years ago, the Sunday that I was introduced to the congregation, so they—so you—could vote if you wanted to call me here. Marie was the first person I met that morning, right outside the side door. I was early—it was basically a job interview, you arrive early. Marie arrived even earlier, as she so often did, together with her husband, Lloyd. (In time, after the congregation did call me here and we moved into the parsonage, my commute to church would be all of 50 feet. Even so, Marie and Lloyd, who would travel 50 miles to get here, one way, would still sometimes arrive before me.) Back to that first Sunday morning, as I was standing at the door, my nerves all ajangle, Marie saw me and asked, “Are you our new Pastor?” I said, “I hope to be.” And then she had more to

say. I don't recall it all specifically. What I do recall is an experience that I would have again on many other occasions, an experience of being fluttered around, with interest and joy, a feeling of blessing particular to Marie. She was so glad to be here, glad I was here, would be glad you all are here. Remember how she would share the peace with the choir? En masse, arms wide, "Peace, choir." As a long time member wrote in response to the email notice of her death, she "did so much for IPLC," she was "a dedicated servant of God." I cannot fail to also mention her husband's dedication to this place, and to her. Seeing that makes it a little easier to believe.

Another person I am thinking of this week is Richard Koehler. Richard had physical challenges, likely the fault of the doctor who delivered him. As a result, Richard had some trouble walking. He sometimes fell. I am sure he often fell, in the course of his life. He always got right back up. Always just brushed it off, and kept on going. It took him time to get places, especially as he relied on public transportation. No matter. He checked the transit schedule, leaving plenty of time, and had meaningful interactions with others on the bus, he would tell us about that. He also had trouble with one of his hands, it had limited mobility, it was curved in, twisted—but his heart was not. For all he must have faced, Richard was not bitter. He was one of the sweetest, kindest, most patient people I know. Sometimes painfully so. Or rather, his kindness and patience, his pace and demeanor, illustrated how painfully lacking these can be in the rest of us. He never said so, of course. Instead, he was always eager to help, however he could, posting things about the church on Facebook, serving as a greeter, being on the Church Council. Richard was disappointed when his second term on the Council ended, he would have happily continued. Not everyone has that attitude; not everyone brings that spirit to leadership and life in community. And he was astoundingly generous. You would not believe it, from someone who lived so simply, all that he gave to his church.

With many of you I've been thinking about Marie and Richard, thinking how glad I am to have known them, to be part of a place that they loved, and that loved them. Another member said this, so well. After receiving a second newsletter death notice in the course of twenty-four hours, this person, who is newer here, wrote back, "Oh man. Another great member. I barely knew these people but seeing them weekly made me feel like part of a bigger, better world."

I have been thinking about these two people, these two characters—and that must be said, too, they were characters. As yet another member said, "Our church lost some character this last week." Marie and Richard had eccentricities, and flaws, and wounds. As we all are, they were broken people, but they also make it easier to believe. They exemplify and personify what it is we believe, as Christians, which we've been reciting together all this Easter season in a prayer about brokenness. Just after communion, that sacrament in which we join with saints of every time and place—with Marie and Richard—just after we receive grace we've been saying together, "Life-giving God, you have greeted us in our brokenness, and nourished us with the body of Christ, broken for us. Risen to new life with you, send us now to bear your healing love into the wounded world."

I've been thinking of that prayer and these two people and what the Ascension affirms. God knows brokenness. The body of the resurrected Christ still has scars: marks in his hands and side—and from his wounded hands he blesses us, and sends us out to be blessings to a wounded world. Jesus is out of sight, but he is at our side, especially when we are wounded. God comes to us in our brokenness, and in brokenness God is glorified. The Ascension of Our Lord is not a location, the Ascension of Our Lord is an assertion. This one who came among us as one of the lowly shows us the heights of honor. This is what we proclaim, what we confess: that the one does that has been lifted high above. We see the Ascension of our Lord every day, in every humble person whose life reveals the power of God. Alleluia and Amen.