

It's Our Turn -- Easter 7C

We've been reveling in the wondrous news of Easter for forty days now, enjoying the annual honeymoon of Christianity and smiling because we know that "Christ is risen," "Christos is Anesti, mos def Anesti." The actual forty days were up on Thursday, the Feast of the Ascension, celebrating the time when Jesus was whooshed up in a cloud from Jerusalem after telling the disciples to be patient and wait. How thrilling – how frustrating for them. Why wait, isn't this the time when everything is going to be set right? ...Master? ...my Lord and my God?

If you go to Jerusalem, you can pay to go into a church where there is a rock with indentations in it from the massive heat coming out of Jesus' feet when he blasted off for heaven. No kidding. And I hope to get there someday, because it is a great story; don't need no Chuck Heston to know it's the greatest story ever told. But really, dents in the rock from his hot feet?

We talked about this last week, how sophisticated we've become – skeptical even – about special effects and the cosmic geography of heaven. There's no such address: we've been up there and looked. So where oh where did Jesus go? Talking about peace, the peace of God that surpasses our understanding, we also heard a formula: love plus good humor equals peace. You can't beat this part of the story: When the disciples are all standing there looking up in the sky. Living in New York, one gets used to it. Somebody will be standing on a street corner looking up and before long somebody else will be looking up too. Plenty of folks just hustle past, determined to go about their business, but a crowd gathers and looks up.

So there are the disciples all looking up, and a couple of strangers come along and join them. One nudges a disciple in the ribs, "Hey, what are we looking at?" The strangers are wearing white robes, so we know they're important – probably angels. So they nudge in the

ribs, “What are you looking at?” Without waiting for an answer (angels being angels, they already know all the answers), they crack wise: “Don’t worry about Jesus, he’ll come back in just the same way he left.”

Well that’s a big help... What are we supposed to do in the meantime? Forty days of excitement about the resurrection of Jesus from his tomb and now this: “He’ll be back?” Forty of course is the biblically symbolic time period for processing things. It took forty days and nights of rain to purge the World of sin when God tried flooding everything. (Bad choice; didn’t work; apology accepted), and it took the Israelites forty years of wandering in the wilderness to get used to the idea that liberation from slavery and oppression are a free gift, but the gift is only as strong as our gratitude and obedience to the law. Forty days for Jesus to process his identity as the Son of God once he was baptized by John: forty days of being tempted by Satan yet unsinning. And now it’s been forty days for us disciples mourn the death of Jesus and revel in his power over that death.

Typically, there is a large measure of denial amongst the Apostles: he’s not dead. Jesus even validates this by showing up – appearing at dinner and on the beach – to ease the pain of loss. But inevitably the forty days are up and we have to let go of him. Notice the Day of Ascension is always Thursday, so we don’t even have to face it head-on on the Sabbath. But face it we must, and the humor helps. “Don’t worry folks, he’ll be back, just the same way he left.” How often do we tell each other, when a loved one dies, “We’ll be together again one day. Or, “She’s gone to be with her loved ones again?”

Lo he went with clouds ascending – and lo he comes back with clouds descending. But, as Sam Cooke sang, “meanwhile, I got to work right here. That’s the sound of the man working on the chain gang.” And let us give thanks to God that we’re not on one. Meanwhile, it’s time to get back to the business of living. We know our redeemer lives and will come again, but meanwhile we have to

live, we have to act. That's what the book of Acts is all about. The strategy, the agenda, the theme of Acts is to move us from the wondrous story of the Incarnation and ministry and teaching of God's very self among us, into the life we will live, propelled by the Spirit. That's the part we have in us, the stuff we're made of, our soul food.

It means tending to our relationships, with family and friends, loved ones and strangers too. With those we help from afar and those we struggle to love nearby. God has withdrawn physically, back into God's self. No longer present in the flesh, God remains very much present in spirit. God's chosen act of Incarnation is completed, but the effect is meant to be permanent. The physical life of Jesus came to an end – we have had forty days to process that – the physical life came to an end and was then transformed, even as we shall be transformed if we keep trying to align ourselves with Jesus.

God's self has gone back to its original nature – the cosmic completeness of all matter and being, after making it clear to us that we are indeed each one of us parts of this whole. But while we are here, in history, just as God, in the person of Jesus was here, in human history, we are meant to act. We are meant to teach one another, care for one another, heal one another, as long as we shall live. There'll be plenty of time for loafing 'round the throne later; but meanwhile, the big seminar is ending and it's time to start providing for our family. And every family, as does every life, begins with a mother. Blessed be all mothers today.

Here is May Sarton, writing about her mother:

Once more
I summon you
Out of the past
With poignant love,
You who nourished the poet

And the lover.
I see your gray eyes
Looking out to sea
In those Rockport summers,
Keeping a distance
Within the closeness
Which was never intrusive
Opening out
Into the world.
And what I remember
Is how we laughed
Till we cried
Swept into merriment
Especially when times were hard.
And what I remember
Is how you never stopped creating
And how people sent me
Dresses you had designed
With rich embroidery
In brilliant colors
Because they could not bear
To give them away
Or cast them aside.
I summon you now
Not to think of
The ceaseless battle
With pain and ill health,
The frailty and the anguish.
No, today I remember
The creator,
The lion-hearted.