

“The Journey Begins”

Happy Ascensiontide! Does anyone know what I am talking about? Don't worry if you do not. I did not learn that Ascensiontide was a thing until yesterday. I have been preaching and celebrating Eastertide, thinking it went up to the Day of Pentecost. This reformed Baptist boy still has some things to learn about the liturgical church and its feasts.

The Feast of the Ascension comes forty days after Easter. That means it always falls on a Thursday, although the date varies, just as Easter Day does. This year Ascension was May 14. I am guessing no one here celebrated Ascension Day. I was meeting with a group of clergy on Thursday. Our meeting went so long that we didn't have time to mark the Ascension.

Some Christian traditions mark the Ascension with feasts, special services, special music, and processions through the streets. This happens mostly in the Catholic countries of Europe, Latin America, and South America. We North Americans are much too Protestant and work too much to set aside a weekday for a religious tradition that seems too Roman Catholic.

While we are not marking Ascension Day with a special service, we at Emmanuel are marking the Ascension every day whether we intend to or not. That is because we have the Ascension window over our entrance door. Take a good long look at it. It is a lovely and inspiring window. It is also lit up at night due to the efforts of John Denègre. Notice it when you drive by at night and see how our church glows with the light of Christ.

Let's now take a closer look at the window. One of the first things I notice about Jesus is that he is neither buff in a sort of Renaissance way nor is he emaciated as in medieval art. He appears to be an average man. The artist is trying to make Jesus more relatable to us rather than an ideal.

Next, I notice his eyes gazing upward toward heaven. I remember several Ascension depictions where Jesus is looking downward as if he is ascending in a balloon and wishing farewell to those who are earthbound. In this case, he seems to be astounded by his ascension and is gazing skyward, wondering what is to come. This is not Jesus who is always in control as he is in John's Gospel. The Jesus in our window reflects the human aspects of Jesus in form and action.

Look at his arms, how they are stretched toward heaven. Could he be climbing a ladder like the angels did in Jacob's dream?¹ Or is he reaching upward for something else? Again, there is less of a sense of control or certainty and more of a sense of Jesus being unsure of what is happening.

Look at his hair and clothing and how it gives us a sense of speed. His hair is whipping back in the wind. His clothing is being pulled down by the

¹ Genesis 28:12

speed of his ascent. There is a powerful rush of air around him as he is pulled upward back to his place at the right hand of the Father in heaven.

Compared to the more magisterial Ascension images, this image is one of uncertainty, wonder, and humility. Given that we do not have photographs or videos, it is the artist's prerogative to show us what he or she sees in the story. The artist is giving a sermon in color, light, and glass.

What I don't see in the window are the disciples, who, like us, are observing this amazing event. Depending on the Gospel you read, the disciples are astounded or moved to praise in the moment. Later they wonder what's next. Jesus has given them instructions to go and preach the Good News, but they are so used to being disciples they are not sure how to do that. In the Gospel of John, they are so confused that they go back to fishing, until Jesus comes to give them more instructions.²

The society outside of the church answers with drugs, alcohol, food, sex, pornography, television, sports, anything that can distract us from the things that worry us. Those who must act go to extremes in their beliefs and actions. The extremes do not help; they just add to our anxiety.

Anxiety, chaos of the world, and the useless remedies of the world may seem to block our way. Do not let them deter you. There is salvation for those who endure in God's love. We must center ourselves in the love of God in Christ Jesus. By loving God and one another.

Like the confused disciples who did not know which way to turn after Jesus ascended to heaven, we are called to endure. As Wendell Berry wrote:

It may be when we no longer know what to do,
we have come to our real work,
and that when we no longer know which way to go,
we have begun our real journey.
The mind that is not baffled is not employed.
The impeded stream is the one that sings.³

Christ has ascended. It is time to do our work, start our journey, use our mind, and sing.

² John 21.

³ "Our Real Work" by Wendell Berry