

Seventh Sunday of Easter, Year A, May 24, 2020
Acts 1.6-14; Psalm 68.1-10, 32-35; 1 Peter 4.12-14, 5.6-11; John 17.1-11
Pastor Renee Splichal Larson

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Now I am no longer in the world,” Jesus says, “but they are in the world (John 17.11).” You and me and those around us are in the world, and Jesus is not, at least not in the flesh anyway.

I once heard a story of a youth director trying to put her son to bed. He was young and kept calling for his mother to come back to his room because he didn’t want to be alone. Tired, and needing her son to go to sleep she said as she was closing the door: “Don’t worry, Jesus is always with you.”

The young boy protested back, “But I want Jesus with skin on!”

Don’t we all want Jesus with skin on? Don’t we wish we could seek out a bodily Jesus, especially during a global pandemic. We want the resurrected Christ to enter into our ‘shelter in place, quarantined’ homes and say, “Peace be with you.”

We want to reach out and touch his robe and be healed. We long to gather with family and friends without being 6 feet apart, and throw a huge party where Jesus turns water into wine. Wouldn’t it be nice if we all just got back from fishing and found Jesus sitting cross-legged in the sand near a fire saying, “Come and have breakfast.”

More than ever, we long for a tangible Jesus; a Jesus with skin on. But because of the witnesses of Jesus’ death and resurrection, we know he has ascended into heaven and is no longer in the world as he once was.

A few days ago the church celebrated the “Ascension of our Lord.” We read in Acts, chapter 1, verse 9: “When [Jesus] had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.” Just like that...the Jesus men and women came to know and love...gone.

It wasn’t until the last 10 years or so in which I have started thinking more seriously about the ascension. As much as I long for Jesus to still be on earth in bodily form, he can only be in one place at a time. If we wanted to talk with him or see him, we’d have to physically go wherever he was.

As strange as it may sound, Jesus “going away” is to our benefit. In chapter 16 Jesus says to his disciples: “...I am going to him who sent me ... I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you (John 16. 5, 7).”

The purpose of the ascension is so the Spirit of God could be unleashed into the world. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus can be anywhere and everywhere any time. This means that Jesus can indeed be present in and with us in our shelter in place, quarantined homes, or as we

live out our vocation in our communities as essential workers. Through the power and presence of the Spirit, Jesus continues to empower us, teach us, love us, forgive us, and make us one.

And it is this very same Spirit, given to us in baptism, that lives and moves in each of us as we carry out Jesus' ministry of forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing in the world.

In John 14, verse 12, Jesus says something that makes us pause. He says: "Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I'm going to the Father."

Excuse me, Jesus, can you say that one more time? You're going to leave us, and we, as your followers, will do greater works than you? Last time I checked I haven't raised anyone from the dead, or made a blind man see.

Although this is true, when I consider all of those who follow Christ and what has been accomplished in his name, it takes my breath away. The church has gone from a handful of witnesses of God's work in Jesus Christ, to millions. Our siblings in Christ are sitting at bedsides, and risking their lives in hospital rooms to save others. Our siblings in Christ are putting seeds into the earth in order that all may be fed. Countless sins have been forgiven and enemies have been reconciled because of the Spirit's movement in the hearts of those who love Jesus.

This is what Jesus means when he says you and I will do greater works, because we will do them together as the tangible body of Christ for one another and for our neighbors.

I have had many of my own conversations with my young son in the evening as I diligently work to help him shut off his brain and fall asleep. It is in these evening hours I am met with a barrage of questions. One night, my son who was 3 at the time, asked me: "Mom, where is Jesus?"

My theological brain went right to the ascension and our confession of faith, as I replied; "Jesus is in heaven at the right hand of God." I expanded my answer and said, "And Jesus has promised to also be here on earth with us always through the Holy Spirit."

He nodded as if he'd written a doctoral dissertation on the second and third articles of the Creed. He then looked at me with complete confidence as he pointed to his chest and said: "And Jesus is inside of me and he is inside of everyone."

Sometimes the Gospel is most clear to us and most profound out of the mouth of a toddler.

As a mother I thought, wow, you are actually listening while you are playing with your cars in the pew on Sunday morning. As a fellow follower of Christ, I thought, yes, Jesus is ... he indeed is everywhere filling the people and the world with his light and love, including my three-year-old.

In that conversation with my son, it was as if Jesus had skin on. "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them (Matt. 18.20)," Jesus reminds us.

God once gave the world a Jesus with skin on through the incarnation of the Word made flesh. We believe in him because witnesses saw him walk this earth, ushering in a new creation where all are fed, where darkness does not overcome light, and where you and I are loved so fiercely that not even the grave can hold us.

Today in our Gospel reading we hear Jesus praying for his followers. How often do you call to mind that Christ lifts up your name before the Father? Jesus prays for you, for your protection and that we all may be one.

He also reminds us that we don't need to wait for eternal life. Eternal life is often equated with something that happens after we die. But Jesus so clearly says to us this day, that "This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent (John 17.3)."

Knowing God and being in relationship with Jesus Christ *is* eternal life, here and now in this place, even in the midst of a global pandemic. Eternal life comes to you now, even in the physical absence of Jesus, and continues into your future that is filled with hope.

Sean White, in *Feasting on the Word*, writes: "The ascension beckons us beyond the anxiety of not knowing what is next into the divinely established purpose of life in the meantime (*Feasting on the Word: Year A, Vol 2*, p. 520)."

In this time of COVID 19, we don't know what is next, yet, we do know the One who holds together all things, the One who lives and moves and dwells in you. As people of faith we know that Christ has come and will come again. We live in both the presence and the absence of Jesus.

So what do we do in the meantime? We pray and love, plant and harvest, give and receive. We write letters and do zoom calls, participate in AL anon and AA groups, paint a picture and appreciate a vibrant flower. We make and hand out food, read and rest, make music and do projects, and appreciate life in all its joy and sorrow. Above all, we trust in the One who holds us in prayer, who is with us till the end of the age, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.