

May 4, 2008 – Easter 7
Augustana Lutheran Church of Hyde Park
Rev. Elizabeth Musselman

Texts: Acts 1:6-14 / Psalm 68 / 1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11 / John 17:1-11

Hymn: “O, Love, How Deep” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* #322)

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

“As they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.” On Thursday night we gathered here and celebrated the feast of the Ascension, and I couldn’t help but wonder: Why is it a feast? Why isn’t it a lament? Jesus left them. He left them with a promise, but he didn’t specify when or how the Spirit will come. Rising to the heavens in glory, it seems that Jesus has abandoned the very human existence that makes the Incarnation so poignant for our lives. “He was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.” Where’s the good news in this story?

And so today we find ourselves in a strange liturgical spot. It’s been three days since we celebrated the Ascension when Jesus was mysteriously lifted up into the clouds, leaving the disciples with a promise of the Holy Spirit. But we still have a week before we’ll celebrate the fulfillment of this promise. Next week at Pentecost the power from on high will descend—literally, as flames upon the foreheads of the earliest Christians, making of them a Church! But for now Ascension is over and Pentecost is still to come. Jesus seems to be simply gone, and we find ourselves in that in-between-time, keeping vigil with the disciples as they wait and wonder: Is Christ still with us, or has he really left us? How will God be present among us? What does the power of the risen Christ mean when he no longer walks on earth? And if he’s not on earth, where did he go? These questions are not merely abstract ruminations on a two-thousand year old event,

because we too wonder about the presence of God in our own lives. The disciples stood looking up at the sky awaiting Christ's return, perhaps feeling empty or puzzled—and here we are two thousand years later, still awaiting that same return—probably not with the same urgency that the disciples felt that day when their risen friend left them—but still wondering, *where is Jesus? Is he present or absent?*

One of the few hymns from the *Lutheran Book of Worship* that didn't make it into our new hymnal, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, is an obscure little hymn called "And Have the Bright Immensities." It was written in 1931 by an Episcopal priest named Howard Chandler Robbins, and I'm guessing that this hymn didn't make it into the new hymnal because it's written in old-fashioned language with British sentence constructions, and I'm guessing that it didn't make it into the new hymnal because it's a bit wacky and its language is a bit dated. But this strange little hymn, number 391 in the *LBW*, is appropriate for the time between Ascension Day and Pentecost, when we wonder whether Christ is present or absent:

And have the bright immensities received our risen Lord,
Where light years frame the Pleiades and point Orion's sword?
Do flaming suns his footsteps trace through corridors sublime,
The Lord of interstellar space and conqueror of time?

That's the first stanza: wild speculation about Jesus' post-Ascension existence up in space, with flaming suns tracing his footsteps, with the brilliant stars bowing down to receive the risen Christ as he wings triumphantly through the heavens across time and space! This hymn is full of images of glory, and perhaps that's another reason it didn't make it into the new hymnal. Martin Luther wasn't very comfortable with the idea of *glory*: it's a concept that makes God seem far from us. Luther believed that the power of God is in weakness, revealed through suffering, culminating in a cross.

But did you notice that the word *glory* (or some form of it) appears nine times in today's lectionary readings? Jesus says it six times in the words of this morning's gospel, as he sits at a table with the disciples and prays aloud to God the Father: "Glorify your Son, so that the Son may glorify you." "I glorified you on earth." "Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed." "All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them." The original scene may have had an intimate feel: Jesus is praying *about* himself, *to* God, *in the presence of* the disciples. And yet, in this final prayer before his crucifixion, Jesus takes on a triumphant and otherworldly character, like the Jesus of the hymn who flies through space and keeps company with the stars. He's sitting right there at the table with the disciples, but he prays to the Father as if he were alone. He refers to himself in the third person; he heaps up Christological titles and statements about his unity with God; and he claims "now I am no longer in the world." He's already absent, even while he's sitting right there at the table with them! In the intensity of his prayer Jesus is already with God, and in the anticipation of his crucifixion Jesus has already left the disciples. He's with them, and yet he's so very far.

But if we look beneath all of the high Christological language of glory and unity with the Father, we see that underlying this prayer for glory is a deep tenderness. It's a prayer of love for the disciples and love for God, a prayer for the love that unifies. And it's a prayer of testimony to the identity of Jesus as Savior; and a prayer of hope that the disciples will understand; and a prayer that God will protect the disciples. It's the prayer of one who loves those for whom he prays. It's a prayer that understands human vulnerability, because as much as Jesus uses the word *glory* we know that in the gospel of

John glory exists only in relationship to suffering [just as the Hebrew word for *glory* means, at its root, weight or heaviness]. And we know the end of the story: that the one who lifts up his eyes to the heavens in this prayer will soon be lifted up on a cross, and that after arising from the cold stone of the grave, he will be lifted up into the clouds where he sits at the right hand of God in glory. And even in his glory he's near us, because it's the glory of a God who walked on the earth among humans in order to save us. He's so very far, and yet he's right here with us.

Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension, and even in his absence from us, Jesus is present with us—more present even than we are to ourselves. “All mine are yours,” he says to the Father, “and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them.” Suffering his way into glory and glorified in his suffering, Jesus is present with the Father from the beginning of creation and one with the Father until the end of time—and so the author of 1 Peter can write to his early Christian audience with confidence: “The spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you” and “the God of all grace . . . has called you to his eternal glory in Christ.” Those words are for us too. We are caught up in the glory because God has called us there; because the Spirit brings God's grace into our everyday existence; because the Son loved us with a love so deep that it can hold glory and suffering together in a single human being.

And so, a prayer that begins in glory is really about love. The Ascension into the starry heavens, the power over space and time, the glory: and yet, Jesus is still with us. In glory and in suffering, in the stars and in the hairs of our heads, in the bright immensities and in an altar candle, in the sublime heavenly corridors and in the dusty first-century footprints, as that strange old hymn puts it, “the heaven that hides him from our sight

knows neither near nor far.” Because we meet God in bread and in wine, in water and in fire, in stone and in song; and we meet God in the mundane non-churchy parts of our lives—at the office, in the Regenstein, in the dissertation-writing or the parent-teacher conferences, at the dinner table.

Always present with us in his strange, cruciform glory, Jesus draws us close with the love of God: the love as of a Father to a son; the love of one who is exalted through a cross. Those disciples who sat at the table with Jesus and listened to his earnest prayer that night—they must have caught a glimpse of his glory as he prepared to ascend to the cross, as he sat right next to them and claimed that he was already gone, as he appealed to God for the love that would draw them together in his absence. But on the night that he prayed with them, the disciples didn’t yet know that the story of Jesus would continue with Resurrection and Ascension and Spirit and Church, and that it would be a never-ending story that continues today at the corner of 55th and Woodlawn, and in our homes, and in our streets. Having loved those who were his own, he loved them to the end—but it’s not an end, because the story of Christ’s love for the disciples is the story of God’s love for us and it’s the story of our call to love one another.

Today’s lectionary reading ends with verse 11 but Jesus’ prayer goes on for 26 verses—and it is in the final verse that we find the essence of the prayer. Jesus ends his prayer saying to God: “I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.” He speaks these words, and then he gets up from the table and leads his disciples across the Kidron Valley and into the garden of Gethsemane where the soldiers are waiting to arrest him. A

prayer that begins with glory ends in a love so deep, so heavy, that it is with us to the end.

Amen.