

“GOD BELIEVES IN US”
John 17:1-11; Acts 1:6-14
The Rev. Elizabeth Oettinger
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It used to be one of the most important Holy Days of the Christian year. Third behind Easter and Pentecost--yes, even more important than Christmas!--in the Middle Ages, the feast of Christ's Ascension was celebrated throughout the church. Solemn processions would wend their way through city streets and village lanes, images of the risen Christ lifted high overhead surrounded by bishops, priests, deacons in full liturgical dress, followed by religious orders--monks and nuns walking two by two--and finally the large company of the faithful. The festival parade ended with a high Mass. All work would cease--governments and businesses close their doors--as the church of Jesus Christ looked heavenward one last time, commemorating the day when its risen Lord left them to be lifted up to the right hand of God.

While in the lexicon of the Catholic church, Ascension day is still one of six church holy days officially designated obligatory for church attendance, the churches around the world did not fill with worshippers this past Thursday. The most visible traces of this day's former importance are found in the fact that through most of Europe, and the Caribbean Islands, and French Polynesia, Ascension Day is a state holiday--banks and businesses closed, worthy of note by Rick Steeves for unsuspecting travelers who might not have intuited this particular day off in their travel planning.

I admit that I have a very un-congregational interest in this ancient church event, which we celebrated this year last Thursday and whose texts we heard this morning as our scripture for the day. I find it somehow sad that in modern times, the feast of the Ascension is observed by more people as a state holiday than as a church holy day. This watershed mark of the ascension is something that merits our attention and reflection as Christians.

In the early days of the church, we are told it was not uncommon for Christians, individually and in groups, to directly experience the Risen Christ in their midst. Now I can't tell you what that experience was (though I'd really like to know), only that the evidence of the early Christian document points to something--stories like that of doubting Thomas or the Emmaus road, Paul's conversion on the way to Damascus. We're told that the resurrected Christ appeared over and over again within the community of the faithful. This living Christ, present in their midst, focused the community: gave guidance, comfort, inspiration and interpretation. And then abruptly it ended. Why? We don't know. But we do know that the event we call the ascension signifies the end of one period of church history and the transition to a new era. Gone were the days when the Risen One himself could be counted on to validate believing, or to answer questions, or give direction. In this new time, both those coming to belief and those acting from belief would have to make their commitments, take their actions based purely on faith, not seeing or direct revelation.

Whatever was God thinking! Why oh why oh why would God hand over the church to the likes of us: to popes and kings, and mystics, and students of theology; to Catholics and Anabaptists, the fundamentalists down the street and us messy disorganized Congregationalists. We've grown

so accustomed to the way things are we don't think to question it. Wouldn't we be better Christians if we still had the Risen Christ right here, a presence we could see and touch, to give us direction and console us when we are bruised and battered by the world? Wouldn't the church present a more unified and powerful witness if we could just ask Jesus about how we should read the Bible, or the war in Iraq, or gay marriage, or our obligation to the starving in Darfur and the homeless in Corvallis. The risen Christ was present; for a while, he lived visible within the church and then he departed, he distanced himself from it all and left the people of the church to answer all questions of faith and practice and action. Again I ask, whatever was God thinking?

Now some of you will remind me, what about Pentecost, what about the gift of the Holy Spirit? That's what we'll be celebrating next week in the church, that, in the words of John the gospel writer, God did not leave us orphaned, but instead sent the Spirit to dwell among us. While not disparaging the importance or the power of the Holy Spirit, it is a very different thing to depend on that which is intangible, unseen. How can we be sure of the presence of the Holy Spirit? How many have misread, misinterpreted that Spirit in the long history of Christendom? Yes, we are told, God has sent and does send that Spirit to dwell among us, but it is our responsibility finally to seek, reflect on, discern that spirit. And once we have discerned what we believe God would want, it is our responsibility to be the visible body of the Risen Christ in the world.

Which should not be news to any of you. I would hope that everyone here has more than once felt the weight of that responsibility, of the church being Christ's visible body. What would Jesus do? What would Jesus have us do? We who bear the name Christian are called to struggle with the living out of such questions. And we're mostly aware of the responsibility of that obligation. But are we equally aware of the gift of it?

The demarcation of Christ's ascension, it's the moment that the church of Jesus Christ becomes a community of belief. And usually we talk about that belief in terms of our believing. But the belief that comes before that both in time and in substance, what the ascension marks, is God's belief in us. God's belief in us. Jesus went away and left his church to us-to our minds, our hearts, our hands and feet. If that's not a leap of faith, I don't know what is. God's faith in us. Have you ever considered that God has faith in you? In you and me, and all of us in this church in conversation and prayer together. God trusts us, despite our weaknesses, our many failures, our thick headedness, our non-godly desires, yes, our sins. Despite all that, God has enough faith to allow us to be Christ's body working at the healing and reconciliation of the world God so loves. God believes that we will think, study, and pray, and truly seek the leading of the Holy Spirit. God has faith in us. What a gift that is: to be not just those who believe in God, but those in whom God believes. Let us celebrate that gift and pray that we might be worthy of such belief. Thanks be to God. Amen.