

So while I was on vacations in France I received this email with the clergy schedule and realized I was up for preaching on Ascension Day...a first for me – surprisingly, so far, I’ve never had a chance to preach the feast of Ascension. I was starting to wonder about what to say, when my husband noticed that: “Given the number of planes we were going to take during our vacations, I’d surely come up with an idea”. I didn’t say it like that, but I did not think that making a connection between the ascension and flying would be the best thing to do. Like many people, I guess, this image of Jesus being lifted up in the heavens is a little hard for me to take in. I have in memory a painting I saw one day in a famous abbey where you just see, on top of the painting, Jesus’ feet and underneath all the disciples lovingly and devoutly staring at his toes. There are images I guess that simply don’t work...or so I thought. Because God loves to prove me wrong. What happened is that actually, during those vacations, I did not take as many planes as expected. As we were getting ready to travel from the very south of France to Paris – a smooth one and half hour trip by plane – strikes hit the country, as it often does, and after our flight was canceled twice, we decided to take the road. And so, I had an eleven hour drive to think – maybe not about what ascension is - but at least about what not ascending feels like.

As a member of the human specie, I don’t know a lot about ascension but I guess I know a lot about what not ascending feels like. It can be simply and plainly about the materiality of our own bodies, a materiality that technology might make us forget for a while, but that easily catch up with us – like when you realize you cannot make you way to point A to point B just like that – you cannot actually fly, it’s a plane that does that for you. More broadly, what we all experience plus or less is that we’re stuck with our own body. I read on day a beautiful interview of a former dancer who said that growing old was like this feeling of becoming heavier and heavier. She said: It’s not necessarily about putting on weight, although it often is, but to her it was more like this body that used to be an instrument to do what you wanted it to do, started to dictate its own rules, and you used to jump and swirl but not it’s like there is more and more gravity to it and actually at some point you start to bend over, like this body was starting to want to go back to the ground it had been taken from.

It's not only about our bodies of course – our bodies can be just a metaphor of our human lives. We are not only stuck with our bodies, more deeply and no matter how far we travel, we are stuck with ourselves, with who we are and what we have done, we are stuck with our thoughts, our failures, our sins. You can try to not feel what you feel or to change your past, you'll observe it generally does not work. We often hear teenagers complaining that they would like to be able to be someone else, to get out of their own skin, often because of fear, shame, sorrow...it can become very dramatic. It may not be as dramatic as we become adults because we have become better at accepting ourselves, or maybe also at distracting ourselves, with work, food, pleasure, you name it, yet sometimes we may experience these desires to run because our own lives have become too heavy, too hard to bear. In those case, being able to just disappear sounds like a perfect divine attribute because this is exactly what is for us impossible to do. And so at some point being human is this: We're stuck to the ground, not flying, not to heavens ascending.

And so as I was having these thoughts during this long drive, I started to really feel very sorry for myself and the human race, but I also felt sorry for the disciples and started even wondering how the ascension could be actually a feast. I felt sorry that it was not bad enough for the disciples to have to endure Jesus's death, only to realize after the wonderful and incredible news of the Resurrection, that Jesus had to go again, and this time going for good, becoming exactly what the disciples could not be, an ethereal god, going where the disciples were not able to go – him in heavens and them back in good old Jerusalem where all the drama of the crucifixion had just taken place – probably the last place on earth they wanted to be.

And when I actually opened the Gospel, I realized that in Luke's story the disciples, far from feeling sorry for themselves, were full of joy. This is what we've just heard: "While Jesus was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem full of joy". Left behind, and loving it. So how about that?

Well, I think first of all, the disciples are not that selfish and, before worrying about what's going to happen to them, they rejoice in seeing Jesus' glory, witnessing how God has been acting in his life. Contemplating that I guess, they realize Jesus' ascension has nothing to do with desertion, running away, and probably very little to do with disappearing either. Jesus's ascension has more to do with completion, and as he himself explains: accomplishment of the Scriptures. Jesus leaves because there is really nothing left for him to do. He has given everything. But what the disciples understand is that he shows them the example of what is going to happen to them, to happen to all of us. We have to do our own work and complete it, and that is actually the story that it is told in the second part of Luke's writing: first the Gospel and then the Acts of the Apostles. As followers of Christ, we don't only need to listen to the story (of salvation), we have to write our own story (of being redeemed people)...

You may know this allegory about the difference between religions. It says that we are in life like at the bottom of the well. Not ascending – stuck in it. And basically all the Masters of many religions pass by the well and tell us how we could accept our own lot or maybe figure our way out, but Jesus is the only Master who comes down the well, takes us on his back and get us out of the well. There is some of what I guess, Jesus came down on earth to save us, but yet we should not forget that there is never any kind of condescension. Jesus saves us in a way that never points out our helplessness and our misery. As he leaves his disciples, he gives them the tools to do the work, trusting them to do the work. As he trusts us today to do our work too. Not on our own, but following his example and with the promise that the Holy Spirit, will gives us “power” to do it - a word we find five times in our readings. Power etymologically speaking does not mean *dominion*, it means *ability*, the capacity to do the work we need to do, to lead our lives to completion, as Jesus did with his. And I was thinking, maybe be better than “doing the work”, we should say with Mother Teresa that “we want to be doing something beautiful for God”. God shows us his love in Christ and then waits for our response to his love. As the book of Acts is the response of the Apostles to the love that has been revealed to them in Luke's Gospel, our lives are our response to the love of God that has been revealed to us.

And so in the end, I think Jesus does not feel the need to “save us from here” as we may believe, piggybacking us as he is lifted up to heavens. Jesus saves us but he does not rescue. And he does that not only because as long as we ask him he will give us the tools to make our way, but moreover I think Jesus does not worry about leaving us to our misery, because he does not think that anyone’s life is miserable. Jesus does not think we need to be taken to another place or to start it all over again – as we sometimes do. Jesus just tells his disciples that they will be renewed and be given the strength to continue. Because as dark or confused as they seem, our lives will make sense eventually. The Holy Spirit made sense of the cross, the Holy Spirit can make sense of everything – and even better, turn pain into something glorious. And so I thought, although it seldom feels like it for us, maybe in the eyes of God we are already perfect as can be, we are just not done yet. It’s important to be reminded of that when we are prompt to judge ourselves, or others, being impatient or disappointed...When we want our lives to be different. We are a work in progress, *the people of the way* (As the first Christians called themselves), the people on the way, because this how Jesus saves us. The promise of the incarnation is that we will become divine first by being human, as Jesus did.

And so if the Ascension is this promise that we will be up in heavens bright and shiny, it’s also an invitation to resist the longing to be up in heavens bright and shiny. On the other way around, it may be an opportunity to love our lives as they are, knowing that God will come to work in them, by the Holy Spirit moving through them. A few months ago, somebody I visited told me that I will love Holy week at Grace church because (I quote): “It makes us feel so holy”. It was said playfully, but I thought about that for weeks, arguing with myself: “Well, church is not supposed to make us feel holy”, but then thinking: “Well church should not only make us feel sinful either”. And I guess, I come up with that that church should only make us feel human and make us think about what human life is in front of God, or better, with God acting in it. Because Jesus ascended to divinity by living to the full his human life in all its joys and promises but also in its heaviness, limitations and sorrow. Living our human lives to the full never meant having it all, it just means: instead of wanting so badly to go higher, to be perfect and holy in our own eyes, maybe we should just be willing to go deeper, question the mystery of our lives and open up, getting ready to welcome the gifts of the Spirit. Amen.