

The Rev. Nina Bacas
 Year C Ascension Day May 26, 2022
 Grace Episcopal Church, Alexandria Virginia
 Gospel of Luke 24:44-53

Today is the Feast of the Ascension. It is a Principal Feast Day just like Easter, Pentecost, All Saints, Christmas, and Epiphany. The Ascension marks the 40th day of our 50 days of Easter, which means it always falls on a Thursday in springtime. Normally not a big night for church attendance, so I'm extra delighted to be celebrating with you here and on the livestream.

We only hear about the Ascension in Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, also written by Luke. It is the end of Jesus's time on earth, and the beginning of the church era. Jesus our redeemer ascended up. Several days later, just as Jesus promised, on the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit, our sustainer, descended down. The church was born.

In Grace School chapel last Friday, I told the students about the ceiling of Peterborough Cathedral in England. I haven't been there myself but through the miracle of Google, I have seen that the ceiling is covered in a rich array of stunning architecture and ornate artwork. In the middle of all this beauty is an outline of two feet. Yes, worshippers and visitors look up to see the soles of Jesus's bare feet to remember the Ascension. Given that my chapel homily was so many days before the actual Ascension Day, yesterday, the 2nd grade teacher and I devised a surprise that they found this morning. We took some brown paper, cut out outlines of two feet and then taped them to the ceiling of each classroom. The reviews were mixed but as we hoped, the visual got them thinking about the story of this day.

But all that focus on rising feet may lead some to believe that Ascension Day is the "festival for the departure of Jesus". But that's not what it's about. It's actually the feast of his glorification at the right hand of the Father. This feast day is not about Jesus being carried up away "from us", but it is about his going "before us". The soles of his feet are a symbol that Jesus goes ahead of us to prepare a place for us. How great to have a best friend in heaven, but what about on earth? Where is he?

I ask because some say that today marks the end of time with Jesus, and the beginning of time without Jesus. That statement bristles me. If this were true, then our Gospel would read that Jesus's followers were thrown into grief. They would have stood there reaching up towards heaven crying for him to come back. According to Luke, that's not what happened.

As Jesus was lifted up, he blessed them. They didn't reach for him in anguish. According to Luke, Jesus's followers responded by worshiping him. They returned to Jerusalem not with grief but with joy in their hearts. They worshipped God continually in the temple. Jesus had opened their minds to the scripture, meaning that they could see themselves as part of the fulfillment of that Scripture. Can you imagine that moment of realization, that they, mere humans, were being swept up into God's plan for the world? This realization filled the disciples with joy. Jesus not only went before them, but his presence would continue through them.

We are daily witnesses to this miracle of the ministry of Jesus's hands and feet through his followers. I'm reminded of a bread story that I bet you may have already heard. Many of us love bread, but rarely do we get a delicious, freshly baked loaf. But most every Tuesday, the clients at the Grace Food Pantry are handed a freshly baked warm unsliced boule. How that happens is a pretty straight-forward story about a man who was swept up in to God's plan. It started a couple of years ago. He was home with his kids who were doing zoom school

and he decided to help others doing something he enjoys. This man delivers these loaves to us every week, each in a bag with a sticker that says “Loaves of Love”.

So where is Jesus? He is everywhere. We see Jesus in the breaking of the bread, and in the hands that bake and give out the bread. We see Jesus in the reading of the Scriptures and teaching of the Scriptures in imaginative ways. Jesus is in the light of the Paschal candle and the light we see in one another. The light that shines when we love one another in the countless ways that Jesus loves us.

Hear this poem called Ascension by Steve Garnaas-Holmes.

The Ascension is not about Jesus's body
rising above the earth,
but about Jesus expanding beyond his body.

He didn't go up,
he went out.
Into all of us.

The disciples stand there,
almost ready to believe
(they won't until Pentecost)

that the body is not there
but here: we are the body,
the body of the risen Christ.

Christ is not an individual but a community.
You are not an individual
but a member of that community.

When Jesus prays “May they all be one,”
it isn't about opinions.
It's that we're all cells of one body.

See that way.
Act that way.
Love that way.

Jesus did not depart on Ascension Day. Jesus went before us to heaven, which brings us great comfort. But also, Jesus continually goes out into the earthly world through us. If that sounds overwhelming, remember the bread dad. He simply followed his joy, in this case, his joy of baking, and now, that joy spreads to others in bags with a love sticker.

So if you can imagine the soles of Jesus's feet on the ceiling of Peterborough Cathedral or on the classroom ceilings of Grace School, may that image remind you that those feet are now yours. Yes, they are big sandals to fill. But as the poem reminds us, those are the feet of you and your community. The bread dad doesn't hand out boules on the street corner. He spreads his joy by way of the Grace community. You are not alone, not in

heaven or on earth. Together, we are the body of Risen Christ, called to love others as Christ loves us. Together, to be a blessing to others as we have been blessed by Christ. Together, to be swept up in God's plan for the church and the world.