

2021 05 16 No One Rises Alone
Ascension Sunday: Mississauga Mennonite Fellowship

Acts 1:6-11 ([The Ascension of Jesus - in Lego](#))
Ephesians 1:15-23 - "[The fullness of him who fills all in all](#)"

Have you ever had a moment when it all seems clear?

In 1958, the monk and mystic Thomas Merton saw things clearly for one true moment. He writes:

"In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world. . . .

This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud. . . . I have the immense joy of being man, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now that I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun."

Jesus was killed. All hope was lost. And then returned to his friends, somehow risen from the dead. Although he was alive, his body still showed the marks of his violent death. Although his body was the same, he was changed, not always recognizable, not always bound by the same laws of time and space.

These days after Easter recall when Jesus walked among us, overcoming death. And this Sunday we remember the strange and hazy story of Ascension. Hear from the Acts of the Apostles...

Then they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

How do you picture this story? I would like you to try to imagine it with me. When the apostles ask 'are you now going to restore the kingdom', what expression is on their faces? What is the

tone of their voice? Are they wondering, pleading, are they expectant, are they disturbed? “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

After the terrors and the wonders they have experienced, after the incontrovertible death of their leader, now somehow standing among them, it must seem like anything is possible. It must seem to them that Jesus could sweep away the Roman occupation and the puppet rulers and restore the fabled golden age of Israel, uniting the priesthood, the prophets, and the monarchy in one person.

Or perhaps there is trepidation. After so much violence, will there now be peace? Or will there now be more upheaval? More risk?

Today, there is a nation called Israel. It was established as sovereign by the United Nations, to try and make a safe homeland for the Jewish people who have been persecuted throughout the world, and most terribly in Europe of the last century. Yet it has not been a safe home, because it was not established with justice. The land was not shared, it was taken. It was established with military power, not divine justice.

And today, across the world, and especially in North America, Christians are praying for Israel to be militarily victorious. And with our taxes and our government’s permission, we subsidize the bombing of children, the starving of families, the restriction of vaccines, the theft of land.

They asked him, Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?

Jesus refrains from answering these implied questions. *‘It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set’*. And yet *‘you will receive power’* and *‘you will be my witnesses’*.

In the days that follow this conversation, the power of God does not establish the earthly kingdom of Israel in an act of sovereign majesty. The power of God, in the decades that follow, scatter this little community across the known world, to share the good news. To tell people that death is not the greatest power. To tell the story of Jesus. The Acts of the Apostles that follow also tells us of the ways that they failed. Almost immediately, they struggled to be kind and generous to one another. They argued about who was more important. They concealed their wealth from each other. They designed hierarchies.

We are the spiritual descendants of that scattered and imperfect community. We continue to struggle with the desire to see God’s reign. Some of us Christians are happy to collaborate with weapons manufacturers and nationalistic fairytales to try to establish our idea of God’s kingdom. Some of us struggle to build kingdoms of our own, seizing power and authority and reputation, and struggling to give it up.

We want Jesus to bless our desires for security, and power. But Jesus says - it is not for you to know. He says *‘you will receive power’*. But you will not use it to be safe or prosperous or comfortable. You will use it to witness to me.

And then he leaves! He disappears into the sky and vanishes behind a cloud!

Their centre has departed! They stand in a circle, looking up, because they do not know what will happen next. How will they be held together now? Do you imagine the apostles looking confused? Distressed? How can this be the end?

What happens next - I don't know any other way to describe it, than comical. As they stand looking up at the sky, two figures are suddenly among them. "Why do you stand here looking at the sky?" The frozen moment is broken with this absurd and wonderful question. And the story goes on.

Days later they receive the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and next Sunday, the church worldwide celebrates this anniversary. But we are sitting with this image. This group of women and men, part of a community of a little more than a hundred, their leader vanished into thin air, and a promise of power to come. Yet a vision of a people scattered across the world. Another diaspora. Another exile. Not a unified kingdom, not a holy empire, not a walled city on a hill, bristling with weapons and storehouses for plunder.

I wonder if that was a sudden moment of clarity for any of them. I wonder if they looked around and saw each other as they truly are - children of a generous and creative God, longing for peace, sorrowing in evil, and burning with bright hope?

Or perhaps they were confused, tired, and afraid.

Which one are you, most of the time? I have to confess, I have a hard time looking at some of the people who share this planet with me, and seeing them shine with God's light. Do you remember Thomas Merton's words? *"I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers"*

I don't have that vision. Sometimes I get close to it, and acts of worship help to bring me closer to that mind. I think that's one reason why it is important to worship God together. We can be unified in that way, we can see each other reflecting God's light. But most of the time, it's not easy. Even Merton comments, *"There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around, shining like the sun."* What do you do, in your life, to see other people as God's chosen and beloved? How do you encourage that in others? I would love to know.

In the meantime, we are often confused, tired, and afraid.

Which brings us to the words from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, which were read earlier. Do you remember? Paul writes that he offers prayers of thanksgiving for the Ephesians for their faith in Jesus and their love for each other. And he prays that God will make them aware of two

things - firstly, the hope to which they are called, and secondly, the power of God that is at work in and around us.

And it is this hope, and this power, that I wish to dwell upon. We are called to hope, yes. We are called to the risky business of imagining a world that does not yet exist. It is a world of dignity, peace, and kinship. It is a world where racism and sexism are unfamiliar concepts. It is a world where justice and peace shall kiss. Describing this hope is the business of the prophets, and scripture offers us many examples.

And like the prophets, we do not hope by our own strength. Paul writes that we hope according to the working of God's great power, the same power which has raised Christ from the dead, and which has placed Christ in the very heart of creation, using the image of a king on a throne. I think it is very important that our Christian duty of hope stems from the same power that overcame death. The work of hope is resurrectory. It is insurrectory, an uprising. Karl Barth said 'to clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world'.

Christ begins the uprising. Christ rises from the grave, in resurrection restoring life, restoring order. Christ rose from the earth in the ascension, sending the Holy Spirit to bring life, to bring order to this new Church, this new body that would fill the whole earth. Christ's resurrection was the first uprising, the first refusal to cooperate with the power of death.

This power that came to the apostles was not the power they could imagine. It was not the kingdom-restoring, enemy-routing power they dreamed of. It was the power of hope. The possibility of a new way, of good news to a hurting world - a world that still hurts to this day, that still needs to hear some good news, an invitation to hope.

But the apostles needed to be emptied before they could be filled. Jesus had gathered them together, had taught and tended them, had even fed them like a mother hen, had joined them in their sorrow and joy like a close friend. And now Jesus had left, and there was an emptiness.

Lao Tzu said "The usefulness of a pot comes from its emptiness." Jesus had formed them into a community. But they were not useful. As long as he was among them in body, they could not see, they were not mature, they were not useful. So he left them, left them empty, so that they could be filled. When that power came it was something entirely new. It was a rushing wind, a burning fire. It was a joyful experience that offered deep conviction. It unified dozens of languages. It gave them purpose again. It gave them a moment of seeing each other, shining brightly, the children of God. But first, they were emptied.

Self-emptying love is at the heart of what Jesus does in our world. Jesus allowed himself to be emptied, to take on the form of a human being, and to suffer alongside us. From time to time, we also are invited to empty ourselves. This is the work of the Spirit.

A few weeks ago the Student Christian Movement of Canada celebrated its 100th anniversary. As the outgoing General Secretary at the end of 5 years, a number of people took the chance to

offer tributes. Amongst all the kind words and fond memories, I heard several people applaud my sarcastic humour. That was an eye opener. I guess that was a big part of who I am.

In recent years I have tried to be emptied of cynicism and embrace earnestness and sincerity. But people have longer memories, and old habits die hard. This is my struggle towards that gospel vision of everyone shining with the same unifying light of God. I must be emptied. I must be filled.

If you are feeling empty of hope, empty of power, empty of promise, you are not alone. If your prayers feel stale, or trite, or too easy, you are in good company. There is never a bad time to clasp your hands in prayer, to invite God's power into your life, into our world, into the church.

Jesus rises, and continues rising. In his rising, he raises us all, we all rise together. In his rising, Jesus pulls together a community around him, hurting people, healing people. And this community feels his loss, a communal emptiness. Their hopes of a glorious restoration of an earthly kingdom are shown to be hollow. This is not God's aim. They suffer the loss of Jesus. And this absence, this loss, allows for their transformation. It allows them to be the scattered community that will change the world, that is changing the world, through the presence and power of God amongst us.

The power of God working within the world is not the restoration of former glories, it is transcendence. God's power is for a universal rising. It is to bring everyone along - not just the holy few. The entire human community - and the more-than-human world too - we are all uplifted. We all rise.

When Paul wrote to the church, to rouse them in faith and in hope, he described Jesus as a glorious ruler, not to glorify human power, but to confound and confront the empty powers of Jerusalem, Ephesus, Rome, and all empires. Jesus is above that power, he is beyond it, he has no need of it. The power of Jesus is the same that Paul preached, the same Spirit of Pentecost, the same baptism that we know, as the resurrection power the apostles knew.

God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

May we be the body of Christ, one with the fullness of him who fills all in all.

May we be emptied of all that keeps us from seeing one another as you see us, shining with your light. May we be emptied of cynicism and cruelty, greed and fear, self-indulgence, envy and strife. May we be filled instead with your Holy Spirit.

We pray this Jesus, as we rise with you. In your name, amen.