

“Credo, Third Series, Part VI, Ascended into Heaven”:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for April 19th 2020 (Second Sunday of Easter)
by Foster Freed

Luke 24: 36-53

I should begin by acknowledging that we again face, this morning, one of the inevitable hazards that are part and parcel of my choosing to follow the order of the creed, rather than the liturgical calendar, to shape this present series of sermons. To be fair, things worked out splendidly last Sunday, when we took as our focus words which may well represent the Apostle Creed’s stirring climax (“on the third day he rose again”), words which were easily made to coincide with Easter Sunday. Less ideal, however, was the fact that a Holy Saturday theme (“the harrowing of hell”) took up residence on Good Friday. And yes: today we find ourselves even more “out of step”, face to face with an event generally celebrated on the 40th day of Easterⁱ, or on the Sunday following the 40th day, the **Seventh** Sunday of Easter, which this year falls on May 24th. The problem, of course, with my retirement pending, is that postponing this “Ascension” themed reflection to May 24th would have eliminated any possibility of completing this series prior to June 28th. And so I am venturing onward—this morning—and hoping to bring at least a few of you along for the ride! And right off the bat...as we continue this journey into the Creed’s lengthy second paragraph, the paragraph focused on Jesus...

...right off the bat, be aware that the Creed’s next statement—“he ascended into heaven”—has generally been joined together with the subsequent confession that “he is seated at the right hand of the Father”, creating something of a compound statement: “he ascended into heaven where he is seated at the right hand of the Father.” Commentaries on the creed have, traditionally, tended to regard that as one indivisible thought...and they have been right to do so. Nevertheless, my intention is to treat the two halves of that statement separately: addressing “he ascended into heaven” this morning and placing a one-week hold on the “is seated at the right hand of the Father”. That choice is inspired (in part) by the fact that at least some of the implications of Christ’s ascension may speak to us with particular power in the spring of COVID-19, but also (perhaps more basically) is inspired by the fact that this morning, were we following the lectionary, we would inevitably encounter the Apostle Thomas. To cut to the chase: I believe that Thomas’ faith-struggles shine a very bright light on our own faith-struggles as people who live in the aftermath not only of Easter, but in the aftermath of the Ascension. Before I bring Thomas out from where he awaits us backstage, however, let me make certain that we are all clear on that which is at stake—for the life of the Church and for the life of believers—when we speak of Christ’s having ascended into heaven.

Very well. Let me begin by acknowledging what some of you may already be sensing, namely that I am planning, throughout this morning's reflection, to ponder the Ascension from a frankly and unapologetically human perspective. Why? Because a close reading of the key New Testament texts makes it abundantly clear that the initial experience of Easter was an intensely **personal experience** for the small band of sisters and brothers who were blessed to encounter the risen Christ in the immediate aftermath of the Easter miracle. (I describe them as comprising a "small band" although Paul confidently speaks of one occasion when Christ "appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive...")ⁱⁱ Whatever their number, the simple truth is that this first group of disciples had **direct experience** of the astounding reality of Christ's having been raised from the tomb. Subsequently—after the initial 40 days, according to Luke's chronology—the experience of Easter became a **mediated experience**: something believers make their own by accepting (on faith, on trust) the **testimony** of that original band of the chosen few who in their own experience encountered the risen Lord and were willing to serve as His witnesses.ⁱⁱⁱ

And it is precisely here, I think, that Thomas can serve as a helpful point of reference. Recall that on the evening of the first Easter, the disciples were huddled together out of fear for their own safety.^{iv} Into their midst enters the risen Christ, who not only reveals himself to them, but "breathes on them" and commands them to "receive the Holy Spirit." It is a brief episode, but one of the most powerful of any of the Easter accounts. Notable, however, is the subsequent disclosure that Thomas (for reasons that are not explained) is not with the other twelve when Christ puts in that Easter appearance. Thomas' subsequent response amounts to a classic expression of the skepticism most of us are tempted to offer when told of an event that appears to defy our sense of what is (and what is not) credible. *"Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe."* Without denying that Thomas' response embodies some pretty profound theological insights....

...at least one of which I hope to explore next Sunday...

...it would be wrong to deny the extent to which Thomas speaks on behalf of anyone who has entertained doubts as to the credibility of the reports of Christ having returned to the land of the living. Indeed!

I think it is entirely appropriate to view Thomas' experience through the lens of Christ's Ascension...and to view the "human" dimension of the Ascension through the lens of Thomas. When Thomas first learns of that which the other members of "the twelve" had experienced on that momentous "first" Sunday, his situation was radically different than theirs...and tangibly similar to ours. The others had experienced the risen Lord; he had not. They had first-hand experience; all he had was their word. And, yes, for the next week all he had was their word until—on the eighth day—he too was given first-hand experience of the risen Christ. My point is simply this. For seven days—while the other members of the twelve were enjoying the afterglow of an Easter encounter—Thomas' own experience was far closer to the situation in which we find ourselves, the

situation in which most Christians have participated for the past 2000 years, grounded in the truth that Christ, having “ascended into heaven”, is no longer available to us in a direct unmediated manner. On the eighth day, however, Thomas joined the others in that he too then found himself living within the brief window that so dramatically opened—for 40 days according to Luke—with the resurrection of Christ. Without overlooking the further shift that would occur on the 50th day...with the sending of the Holy Spirit...I will nevertheless maintain that there is a qualitative difference between the direct experience of the risen Christ afforded the apostolic band, and the mediated experience of the risen Christ for which most of the faithful have needed to settle during this impressively long “time-between-the-times”^v, this time through which we continue to endure, even as we sing our Easter hymns, even as we shout our “alleluias” and add our heartfelt “Amens”.

Over this past week—reflecting on the lives we are presently leading under the shadow of COVID-19, doing so in light of ongoing encounters with a wide range of thoughtful reflections on the mystery and miracle of Easter—two recent pieces, written by colleagues, made an especially strong impression. One of those pieces was an Easter sermon by Colin Peterson, a colleague and friend who, having started out as a United Church minister, now serves as a Priest with the Roman Catholic Church. Father Colin, in his Easter homily, speaks of the joy that is so much a part of our Easter festivities and yet, he finds himself making a further point.

“...if we’re honest about it, we are celebrating that which is not fully realized, a day of victory that has not fully dawned. When we consider our world with all its suffering and pain, especially now as we contend with the devastation of the coronavirus. when we consider the prevalence of evil and the way in which sin distorts even the most noble human efforts, when we consider the tragic, unjust and untimely deaths that break the hearts of good and faithful people, we might be tempted to say that the resurrection didn’t make much difference. We might be tempted to say that Jesus not only died in vain but that he rose in vain because nothing much has really changed.”^{vi}

Powerful...and yes...somewhat unsettling words: but words which are well matched in their power and in their ability to unsettle, by a moving reflection published in *Broadview*: the magazine that we once knew as *The United Church Observer*. In his reflection, former United Church of Canada Moderator David Giuliano—writing from the perspective of his work as a Foodbank volunteer during this present time of crisis—is led to offer an uncomfortably honest perspective on the contrast between our **experience** of Easter and our **experience** of Good Friday.

The resurrection...is aspirational. It is described poetically, with metaphors and symbols—the curving neck of fiddleheads, crocuses sprouting in the snow, the song of a sparrow in a blossoming cherry tree, the restoration of relationships, an ineffable inner awakening—all true, beautiful and full of promise. Good Friday, on the other hand, is as

literal as a grave. The fear, despair, injustice, violence and suffering of God on a cross persists in the flesh.^{vii}

And please do not fail to observe that I have labelled David's observation here—as I would also label Colin's observation in his sermon—as descriptive of the “experience” of Easter...**not** as descriptive of the reality of the Easter. I do so as someone who actually believes that our experience of Easter—not unlike the experience Thomas had for the first seven days after Easter—is actually an experience of **Christ's absence** as much as it is an experience of **Christ's presence**: an Easter experience mediated through the experience of the Ascension, the experience of Christ's “up, up and away”, which is to say: an experience of Easter into which doubt—the stark unavoidable, undeniable **possibility** of “doubt”—cannot help but become a significant possibility for all but the sturdiest (or perhaps the most “blinkered”) of us. And therein, I think, is to be found a truth that ought not to be swept under the rug....that ought not to be hidden from view, like the eccentric relative that never gets invited to family-gatherings but is, nevertheless, always on everyone's mind: a truth which, I hasten to add, is far from as uniformly bleak as we sometimes imagine it to be.

Begin here...begin by acknowledging that doubt is a very big deal: perhaps especially in the Protestant world, where we often use a misleading shorthand which speaks of being justified “by faith”. Given the immensity of what is, thereby, at stake in questions of faith and doubt, it has long been tempting to demonize doubt, which has always struck me as a wrong-headed solution: guaranteed to heighten rather than resolve the perennial challenge of doubt. On the other hand, as an understandable reaction to that demonization, others sometimes romanticize doubt: acting as if the person mired in doubt is the true hero of faith; that too strikes me as a mistake, tempting though it too may be. What both of those responses fail to acknowledge as fully as ought to be acknowledged, is not only the stark truth that Thomas-like doubt is an almost inescapable dimension of the life of faith in the aftermath of Christ's ascension, but also the extent to which the narrative arc of the story that shapes our faith...

...Christ not only risen, but ascended...!

...provides a clue as to the unique challenge and yes...the unique privilege...of what it means to be a human person: including those human persons who have come to know the risen Lord. The word I am led to use here, the word “freedom”—making use of a word that is complex and deeply problematic—nevertheless, remains for me an essential word in this context. Why? Because what I want to say—what I **need** to say at this juncture—is that we have been offered, we disciples in the aftermath of the **twin events** of Easter and Ascension, is not merely the “**possibility** of doubt” but the “**freedom** to doubt”, which like any “freedom” is both a gift and a challenge. Problematic as any talk of “freedom” must certainly be, especially when it involves the freedom to enter into something as questionable and as troubling as “doubt, nevertheless serves to disclose (or so I have come to believe) something that

is quite wonderful about our relationship to the God we worship, which is to say the quality of relationship into which God has **chosen** to enter.

After all! There is more than one way in which to characterize the significance of Christ's "up, up and away". We can certainly choose to regard ourselves as second-class citizens, those who have been abandoned: pining after (and resenting those who were privileged to have been offered) direct encounter with the risen Lord, direct unmediated access to Easter, where neither worry nor doubt could ever impact them (or so we like to imagine!) Or—and I obviously hope this will be our choice—we can regard ourselves as being on the receiving end of the privilege of living within the God-given freedom (limited and conditioned though it be) of those who must "work out their salvation in fear and trembling",^{viii} having come to know God not as a micro-managing puppeteer, but as the loving Creator who "for freedom has set us free"^{ix}. Sojourning onward as those for whom knowledge of Christ has not obscured a capacity to acknowledge a world that remains less than what we hope for it to be...a world that, even here...even now...

...even on the far side of Easter...

...remains one in which even those "who have the first-fruits of the Spirit" will inevitably find themselves "groaning inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as daughters and sons, the redemption of our bodies."^x As an Easter people we know the joy of the Lord. As an Ascension people, we also know the patience required of those who remain in a world that has yet to be fully and finally redeemed, a world in which God is not yet "all in all".

Consider. Consider the countless ways in which COVID-19 has served to remind us of the "not yet fully redeemed" nature of the world in which we live: a world in which, on top of everything else, bad news travels with remarkable speed^{xi}. Whatever else that means for us, surely it means the reminder that our witness—our Christian witness—ought not hesitate to acknowledge our shared humanity in the midst of a world that still groans in anticipation of the **something more** that has been promised to it. Denial of the actuality of the world in which we live—the good, the bad, the ugly of it—does us little credit. On the contrary, we are unlikely to be shown any "credit" for our proclamation of the "good news about Jesus" unless it is abundantly clear that we are not oblivious to the "bad news" that shadows so much of our shared-lives. Without denying the deeper meaning of the Ascension, the fact remains—in terms of much human experience—that a post-Ascension world is a world in which the news of Easter can readily be dismissed—as Thomas initially dismissed it—as nothing more than rumor and wishful thinking. Which, I hasten to add:

...leaves those of us who have chosen to embrace those rumors, with no choice but to roll up our sleeves and utilize our God-given freedom to join in the shared human work that is ours to do, as disciples and yes, as participants in the **human-story**.

No choice but to roll up our sleeves and engage the tough work of prayer (**not wishing but praying!**) in anticipation of that day when those ancient-rumors will shake the very ground beneath our feet. No choice but to offer our prayers...and our lives...in allegiance to the One who not only “rose from the grave” but ascended into heaven: **not** into the ether (though we sometimes may “feel” that to have been the case), **not** to “never-never land” (though we sometimes may “fear” that to have been the case) but—having promised that he would not “leave us orphaned^{xii}--is rightly said to have ascended to “the right hand of the Father.”

But therein lies a tale for another day...a tale which, hopefully, will be told a mere seven days from now! Through Christ! Amen.

A Prayer for Easter II

Gracious and Holy God:
greater than our most exalted conception of you,
and yet nearer and more intimate than our very breath.
We thank you for this day
and for the happy news of Easter
whose songs of joy we make our own.
Help us to know you for ourselves...
and in those times when you seem most elusive...
help us to trust the testimony of those
whose knowledge of you far exceeds our own.
Keep us growing even in times of doubt,
keep us hopeful especially when despair knocks at our door,
and grant us the courage to follow the risen Christ,
wherever he might lead us, whenever he might call to us.
In His name we pray. Amen.

ⁱ That dating is based on Acts 1: 3

ⁱⁱ 1st Corinthians 15:6

ⁱⁱⁱ Paul, in that same section of 1st Corinthians 15, describes himself as “one untimely born”, clearly referencing the fact that his encounter with the risen Christ took place much later than those initial 40 days. Nor do I wish to be dismissive of those from later ages (often but not necessarily Christian contemplatives) who report encounters with the risen Christ. My belief in the veracity of at least some such reports does not make them normative for the vast majority of Christians over the past 20 centuries.

^{iv} John 20: 19 and following

^v In other words, the time between his Ascension and his return at the end of time

^{vi} From an Easter homily preached by Father Colin as chaplain of St. Paul’s College, Winnipeg

^{vii} David Guiliano, “On Good Friday amid a plague, a hard truth emerges”, https://broadview.org/good-friday-reflection/?fbclid=IwAR3sbmb_19zoQKX5mB7J8-LWF3E04w2i4ReXcWhswjdU8IkyRv6iBB9S9rY

^{viii} Philippians 2:12

^{ix} Galatians 5:1

^x Romans 8: 23

^{xi} I am putting the finishing touches on this sermon as news begins to travel from rural Nova Scotia, concerning the seemingly senseless slaughter of at least a dozen people in what appears to be an act of calculated rage.

^{xii} John 14:18