

Ascension, Year B  
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI  
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I went to a funeral a few years ago, and it was held in a Lutheran church. A lot of the service seemed very familiar to me. But when the pastor got to the communion part of the sermon, I noticed that he did two things that seemed strange to me: he used real bread instead of wafers, and he also only brought one piece of it to the altar as he told the story of the last supper. He had left the rest of the bread on the table behind him. In the Episcopal church, when we tell the story of the last supper, we place all the bread on the altar, not just some of it.

When it was time to go up for communion, I had this very silly thought: I hope I get some of the bread that was on the altar and not the bread that was on the side table. This is insane. And, worse, this is superstitious rather than religious. Somehow, I had gotten it in my head that because they were blessing the bread differently than we do that God somehow couldn't make the three-foot leap to make that bread holy. And, really, when you start to think about it, there are 2.2 billion Christians in the world, and every one of them has some version of Communion. Some folks meet in homes for simple agape meals. Some people have little shot glasses of grape juice. Some people use rice wine or indigenous grains. Heck, we even have gluten-free options for people with allergies.

So why was I so hung up on the form of my religious observance? Probably because I am a human being on planet earth. We get comfortable with what we know. We start to confuse what is good to have in church with what is essential to have in church. I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but we don't need lots of the things that we like to have. This is one of those Christian lessons that I need to learn over and over again.

But I will tell you, this past year has really driven it home. I have watched this community praise God in the strangest ways. Think about the drive-by blessings. Think about the Advent art gallery walkthroughs of the parish. Think about a freezing cold Christmas Eve when we walked through the church with our masks on trying to live the Christmas story while staying socially distanced. And think of the countless zoom prayer services nearly every day for a year. This is a staggering amount of worship of God and an amazing amount of holding one another's burdens. In other words, this is what being the church looks like. Just because we are in a pandemic does not mean that we let our worship stop. If anything, we worshipped more. It just meant that we had to get really creative.

I was struck with Jesus' promise to his disciples in the text today. They are wondering what will happen when he leaves them, and he tells them in no uncertain terms that they will be clothed in power to continue God's work in the world. He did not tell them they would have a pretty church building. He did not tell them that they would have access to the correct way to worship God. He did not tell them that things wouldn't be difficult sometimes. Instead, he told them that once he was gone, power would come to them in the form the Holy Spirit. And that same Spirit would animate their ministries until the end of time.

And if that isn't what we have seen in these last months, I don't know what is. Month after difficult month, the church has been alive with the grace that comes from the spirit of God. We have preached the good news. We have buried our beloved dead. We have cared for the sick and the lonely. We have studied the scriptures, and we have worked toward the succor of the poor and justice for the powerless. The power that Jesus promised on the day of his Ascension never stopped coming to us, even in the darkest times in this difficult year.

And I am cautiously optimistic that our summer and Fall will continue to bring us together physically again. We have an advantage that the disciples did not. When they felt Jesus go up into the clouds, they had to sit with a deep sense of faith that they would be empowered to continue Jesus' ministry in the world. Unlike them, we have actually seen it in action. It is very easy for me to believe that the power of Christ is among us, but I have seen it every day for the last five years here at St. Mark's. I'm not saying that there isn't more work to do. Of course, there is. And I'm not saying that this last year hasn't left a scar on the church. Of course, it has. But I don't think that even the most difficult times are outside the grace of God.

So, perhaps we can worry a bit less about the correct way to worship. And maybe we can worry a bit less about the things in church that are not essential. We are empowered to be relief for a weary world, and I see no reason why we can do that in a mask, why we can't do that on zoom, why we can't do that worshipping in a courtyard. Do I want everything back the way it was? Of course I do. But I believe the message of the gospel today is that we are to follow the Christ rather than our own wants and aesthetics. If we show up, Christ will empower us for ministry in the world. Everything else is extra. Everything else is negotiable. stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." Amen.