

God, the Ascension and the Divine Hokey Pokey  
June 5, 2011  
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church  
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture: John 14:1-3, Acts 1:1-11

So, happy Easter!

I'm sure you've all been celebrating in your own ways for these past weeks since the season of Easter *began*. You remember that bright morning back in April, when we had a packed house. Ah, it was only the start of our Easter festival, right?

There is no doubt in my mind that you've been living as Easter people for these last 40-plus days. You've greeted every morning since as if it were Easter morning all over again, keenly aware of the joyful news of the resurrection. I'm positive that the life-changing revelation of Christ's victory over death has shaped every hour since and that, as scripture commends, you have been praying without ceasing in response to God's grace in Christ.

You have been celebrating Easter this whole time, haven't you?

Well, if your answer to all of that is something along the lines of, "Well, sort of," don't feel bad. We in the church haven't exactly done our part as well as we might have, either. We do a great job with Lent, the 40 days that lead up to Easter. But we allow the world to forget that Easter is its own season, a time that should be every bit as remarkable and wondrous as when the risen Christ first appeared to his disciples.

To tell the truth, only liturgical calendar wonks know that the Easter season ended Thursday. That was Ascension Day, the day when we remember how Christ finally returned to God for good, his earthly sojourn concluded. From God he came. To God he returned.

No, you didn't miss any special sales at the department stores. No last-hurrah Easter egg hunts. Ascension Day evokes barely a yawn in our culture, if that. We have a mighty short attention span, especially when it comes to matters of faith. That's a shame, really. If the resurrection isn't worth celebrating for 40 days, then what is?

This week, I've been thinking about those 40 days after the resurrection and what all of Christ's comings and goings in those days might tell us about God. God came into the

world in Christ, to experience all that you and I experience, to walk as you and I walk. In Christ, our creator enjoyed friendship and the satisfaction of a good meal with good company. He knew fatigue after days of walking from place to place. He knew anger and loss. He knew sorrow and abandonment.

But he also knew love. Most of all, he knew love. So, even after the victory of the cross, saying goodbye could not have been easy for God in the human side of Jesus. The time came for our Creator to separate from us in a particular way, until coming again.

I've been wondering: How did God feel when it came time to, in effect, cut the umbilical cord connecting us to the Divine in flesh and blood? Was it possible that our heavenly parent wondered whether we were really ready?

This spring at the Cleghorn household, a robin built a nest between a post and a downspout on our side porch. She was an excellent mother. She came and went and came and went to feed and protect them, always keeping an eye on the nest even on her trips to find worms or more sticks for the nest. The three babies grew fast until the nest could hardly hold them.

One day, we noticed the nest was empty. But one of the young birds had made it only as far as the porch rail just beneath the nest. It seemed healthy but hesitant to enter the world. We kept our distance. The mother was nearby, no doubt. Then finally, with a bit of encouragement from one of my daughters, the young bird flew over to a nearby rose bush. We haven't seen any of them since, but I bet the mother robin still has her eyes on her young ones, wherever they are.

We should always be careful about ascribing human emotions to the divine. But I wonder if it was a little like that with God in those days when, in Christ, God was checking in on the disciples on the road to Emmaus, in the upper room and on the shore, cooking a fish breakfast. In Christ, God stayed nearby those who had committed themselves to the way in and of Christ. In Christ, God came and went in what the book of Acts says were "many convincing proofs," appearing to the disciples and describing the kingdom of God.

Like the mother robin, maybe God was just making sure we were ready to begin this long period before Christ comes again. Or maybe, just maybe, God felt a little ambivalence. Maybe God had mixed feelings. Maybe the human-to-human attachment God experienced through Christ was hard to give up.

Perhaps we might think about this time between the resurrection and the ascension as a time when God did something of a dance. Call it the Divine Hokey Pokey. You recall the Hokey Pokey. Many of us grew up doing it at parties and at skating rinks.

“You put your right foot in, you take your right foot out.  
You do the hokey pokey and you shake it all about.”

Maybe the season of Easter ought to remind us how, in the risen Christ, God was putting one foot in and one foot out, just to hang around this earthly realm a little while longer. Perhaps that tells us something about the nature of our God, a parent who had a hard time leaving us, at least in human form, as with a parent dropping a child off at overnight summer camp, or college or watching a child drive off in a car with a sign that says, “Just Married.”

As with each of those occasions in our own lives, the day came for Christ to ascend. It always was to be. From God, to God. So it was reported in the 11 verses we heard Wilma read from Acts a moment ago.

Somewhere along the way, in the two thousand years since, we’ve lost focus on the ascension. Christ’s birth and baptism, Christ’s parables and prophecy are all richly portrayed across the four gospels and examined in the letters that make up the balance of the New Testament. Christ’s passion, his Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem, his arrest, trial, death and resurrection, those events draw our prayerful reflection during Holy Week. But, as for the ascension, it can be easily overlooked.

As we heard in the Gospel of John, Christ foretold it, how he would go ahead and make a place for his followers in the heavenly part of the kingdom of God. And for centuries God’s people sought to find meaning in the ascension. In our historical creeds and confessions, the ascension gets passing mention in the Nicene and Apostle’s creeds, our two earliest. In 1560, the Scots Confession declared that Christ ascended “for the accomplishment of all things.”<sup>1</sup>

Two years after that, as the Protestant Reformation rolled on, Lutherans and other break-aways from the Catholic Church wrote a confession in Heidelberg, Switzerland, adding that while Christ was taken up into heaven, he is “never absent from us.”<sup>2</sup> One-hundred eighty years later, when a new people calling themselves “Presbyterians” split off from the Puritans of England, they asserted in the Westminster Standards that

---

<sup>1</sup> Scots Confession, Chapter XI, 3.11

<sup>2</sup> Heidelberg Confession, Lord’s day 18, Question and Answer 47

Christ's glorification consisted of two equally important steps, his resurrection and his ascension.

Through all of these statements of faith, our predecessors defined clear roles for the risen Christ in heaven. There, Christ is our advocate, a mediator for us in and with our creator Lord. Christ is also head of the church, as one who was once flesh and blood and who will recognize and receive us when our day comes to enter the church triumphant.

Christ also left us what the Heidelberg Catechism calls a "counterpledge," the Holy Spirit to guide and abide with us in Christ's place, until his return. Both the account of the ascension in Acts and one in the Gospel of Luke use the same words about the Holy Spirit. It comes as God's "promise" and presence. It gives the people of God "power" as well as purpose to witness to Christ in all that we say and all that we do.

All of those interpretations of the ascension help us think more deeply and broadly about the role Christ plays in union with God. They give us comfort that in Christ, there is a side to God that knows our walk in this world and advocates for us.

The odd thing, at least to me, is that we Protestant Christians seem to have left it there as far as trying to express an understanding of the ascended Christ. As far as our creeds and confessions go, we have had little to nothing to say about the matter since the Westminster standards four hundred years ago.

I suppose there are many possible explanations. As I said earlier, we moderns have a short attention span when it comes to the liturgical calendar. Maybe we have simply fallen prey to all the commercial attention on Easter as a single day, and the ascension has been lost by the wayside. Perhaps holding focus for 40 days between the resurrection and the ascension is just too much to ask.

Then there is always the question of Biblical literalism, of how various people read the Bible in various ways. Some take the account in Acts as the literal truth, hard fact. A purely scientific view of the universe rules out the kind of bodily extraction of the risen Christ that we read about in Acts. A middle view might agree generally that we need to take account of science in our faith but leave room for an ascension happening once, with Christ, as in one of many divine miracles.

There are other complications. Close readers of scripture may point out that the Apostle Paul's encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus came decades later, long after the Ascension. Did God in Christ come back just that one time?

All of those questions are good ones and they raise even larger questions of whether the Bible is a history text book, a scientific textbook, a written record of an oral tradition, all of the above or none of the above. Those are questions we can each spend a lifetime answering, and that would be a life well spent.

It's been said that the best interpretation of scripture is ... scripture. So I will leave this matter of the ascension there, for today at least. One of the lines of the account in Acts of the Ascension that has been often quoted is the admonition by the two men in white robes that appeared when Christ rose out of sight. They ask the apostles, "Why do you stand around, looking up toward heaven?"

The author of the letter to the Colossians picked up on that very good question. The church members at Colossae were debating the true identity of Jesus. Was he the Messiah, the anointed one? Was he a great teacher in line with other great teachers? The letter to the Colossians instructed those Christians to find their answer by keeping their eye on Christ. He didn't mean this literally, of course, because Christ in bodily form was gone.

Still, Colossians chapter 3 tells those wondering first-century Christians that there is one certain way they can know the identity of Christ – by caring about the things Christ cared about and still cares about. Eugene Peterson translates those verses this way in *The Message*:

So, if you are serious about living this new resurrection life with Christ, *act* like it. Pursue the things over which Christ presides. Don't shuffle along, eyes to the ground, absorbed with the things right in front of you. Look up, and be alert to what is going on around Christ, that's where the action is. See things, Colossians says, from Christ's perspective.

In Christ, we are saved by grace and through Christ we see the possibilities of the kingdom of God. In Christ, God came into the world and, even after the high drama of Easter morning, for a little while, at least, God kept one foot in this realm and one foot out. In Christ, God appeared to the disciples "in many convincing ways." Now, together with the Creator, the risen Christ reigns as our advocate and the Holy Spirit dwells with us here to guide our steps.

So if it is the kingdom of God that we seek, we are charged to keep our heads up, to stay on alert, to avoid getting distracted by things that don't matter, to look out to the horizon of possibilities that are ours in Christ. The kingdom of God is there, if we see

things from Christ's perspective. That is how we will know Christ – and how Christ will know us - in the here and the now and the then.

Amen.