

May 21, 2023  
The Seventh Sunday of Easter  
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert  
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Acts 1:6-14  
Psalm 68:1-10, 33-36  
1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11  
John 17:1-11

When Jakki and I lived in Vermont, our home was not far from a church whose sign bore this slogan: "Proclaiming Christ and Him Crucified." I drove by that church only occasionally, which was fortunate, because I got stirred up every time I saw that sign. The thing is, a slogan such as that suggests a particular theological orientation, one that I do not share, one of a sort that I generally strive to avoid.

I haven't seen that church or its sign since we moved to California in 2010. But it irked me so deeply that I still think of it occasionally. I thought of it again last week as I pondered this today's sermon. Wondering whether that church still uses that slogan, I did some googling and clicked on the resulting link. Up popped that church's Home page, and there it was, right at the top, in large letters: "Proclaiming Christ and Him Crucified." *Christ* and *Crucified* are in bold. Because it's in the banner, it's at the top of every page of that church's website.

You know what? It still stirs me up. All these years later, the church still has the same slogan, and I'm still asking, Why? Why "Proclaiming Christ and Him Crucified"? Why not "Proclaiming Christ and Him Incarnate"? Why not "Proclaiming Christ and Him Resurrected"? Why not even "Proclaiming Christ and Him Ascended"?

Of course, I know some of the whys. But let's first take a detour and then get back to that.

This past Thursday was Ascension Day, the church's observance of the day that Jesus Christ was taken bodily into heaven. It's one of the seven principal feasts of the church. Therefore, technically, it's equivalent in importance to Christmas and Easter. Practically, you'd never know it. Even compared to the other principal feasts—Pentecost, Trinity Sunday, All Saints', and the Epiphany—the Ascension falls short. It doesn't help that, being 40 days after Easter Day, it always falls on a Thursday and at a particularly busy time of year. I expect that most of us barely registered it last week.

I got an Ascension reminder on Thursday via a meme in my Facebook feed. The image was a typical renaissance painting of the Ascension. You know the kind: at the top, Jesus is floating among the clouds; at the bottom, some disciples are firmly planted on the ground and looking up. Superimposed on the image were these words: "The Feast of the Ascension: Celebrating the day that Jesus began working from home.

This bit of pandemic humor is funny; it's also theologically, or perhaps organizationally, astute. The thing is, stories about appearances of the bodily resurrected Jesus kept popping up long past the time at which they were supposed to have stopped. A definite moment of ascension helped church leaders put a stop to these unauthorized tales. But I like to think there's more to it than that.

We all got an Ascension reminder today via our first reading. It's the Ascension story from the Book of Acts. In it, Jesus promises his apostles the gift of the Holy Spirit and then is lifted away. The apostles seem to be frozen in place; the text says that their gazes fixed on the sky. Two white-robed mystery men shake them out of their stupor with these words: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Maybe this is a bit of a key to the "more to it" of the ascension. I suspect it's something like this: If all Jesus' followers do is stand around looking up toward heaven, then they're probably doing something wrong. The disciples will see Jesus the second time the way they saw him the first time: at their level, vulnerable among the vulnerable. Their own orientation to the world needs to be like his. And, just maybe, in order to adapt that orientation to the world, Jesus had to get out of the way and leave them to it.

It must have worked. Keep reading, and you'll learn that the followers of Jesus then numbered 120. Imagine this church about half full. That is not very many people. Apparently it was enough. In ten days they will receive that gift of the Holy Spirit. That's when their real work will begin. Today, we are among the fruits of that work.

One of the oddities this time of year, this time during the season of Easter, is that we hear from two different gospel writers on the same Sunday: Luke, who is also the author of Acts, and John. It's always a little risky to try to mix them in the same sermon cocktail, because they offer to very different perspectives about Jesus, who he was and what he was saying. But I'm going to go ahead and mix them up anyway.

Today's gospel reading from John is taken from the long speech he makes to his followers on the night of his arrest, giving them final instructions and preparing them for what comes next. The portion we just heard is a prayer, during which he talks a lot about "glorification." Through the course of his gospel, John depicts Jesus as doing miraculous things in order to demonstrate the glory of God. Here, John's spotlight of glorification shifts from God the Father to Jesus the Son.

Some interpret this section of John to say that Jesus' glorification comes through his death by crucifixion—that it comes through his experience on the cross. But that's simply not what I hear; it doesn't even make sense to me to limit it to that. That's because so much of what Jesus talks about here and elsewhere is not death, or not only about death; it's also about subsequent life. It's all about mutuality and unity, which always included Father and Son, and which now also includes the followers of the Son. Glorification is part of the crucifixion only because of what happens in the wake of that tragedy: his resurrection, his ascension, his new embodiment in the lives of his followers. As we are told—as has been demonstrated—God will continue to act through them, in the power of the Holy Spirit. As we heard last week, all will be held together by a binding love. As we heard today, Jesus prays for the disciples, and for *their* glorification. It seems to me that their embodiment of love *is* the glorification of God.

Maybe *our* embodiment of love is the glorification of God.

It seems to me that so often churches so insistent on proclaiming Christ crucified don't necessarily get that part. They are often so focused on their own take on sin and hell that they have no room to love people like me. When I checked out the website of that church in Vermont, I learned that it's a member of the Southern Baptist Convention. As such they in fact do not fully affirm and include LGBTQ people; they don't allow women pastors. At heart it's about reconstructed purity codes of a sort that Jesus never insisted upon, and in fact worked hard to overturn.

Still, in the spirit of Christian unity, let's ponder what we might learn from that church by trying to adapt their slogan for our community. "Proclaiming Christ and Him Crucified" clearly doesn't work. As I suggested earlier, we might try "Proclaiming Christ and Him Incarnate" or "Proclaiming Christ and Him Resurrected" or even "Proclaiming Christ and Him Ascended." But the thing is, I don't think it's correct to pick one part of the story of Jesus and say, There it is! *That's* the magic sauce! Instead, I think what's important is the entire arc of Jesus' life, from birth through his ministry to death to resurrection to ascension. A deep and honest understanding of his entire story, his entire message, is what should inform us as Christians today.

That's a lot more work, but I feel certain it's the best way to go. If so, then maybe the best option for us is to shorten that slogan in this way: "Proclaiming Christ." That's it. "Proclaiming Christ." Admittedly, in that, we are challenged, and that's where we might learn something. We're not always the best at proclaiming. I was chatting with one of my neighbors recently. She's around 40 years old, and she only recently, in the last couple of years, even learned that Christians like us even exist.

People need to know. They do. The situation is dire. Jesus is working from home; let's do the same. Our home is this world, our world, here and now, starting with our neighbors and our friends and our communities. It just grows from there. So celebrate the Ascension. Proclaim Christ. In word and in deed, proclaim Christ.