

Sermon on Acts 1:1-11
Feast of the Ascension, May 17, 2015
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
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So where is Jesus, 2000 years and 40 days after the resurrection? Is he up in heaven at the right hand of God? Is he in the bread and wine of holy eucharist? Is he in your heart? Is he in the world, or in your neighbor in need? Has Jesus abandoned us, or is he still present with us? Well, it depends on who you ask!

This past week there have been headlines trumpeting something that is not surprising to us at all: *Study says: Americans are less Christian; More Secular.* Well, duh! Those of us in the Church with eyes and ears I think know this! In Monday's *Pioneer Press*, we could read the Associated Press article out of New York that began, "The number of Americans who don't affiliate with a particular religion has grown to 56 million in recent years, making the faith group researchers call the "nones" the second largest in total numbers behind evangelicals, according to a Pew Research Center study released Tuesday."

The main point that comes across from this study is that although Christian is the dominant faith by far in the United States (7 out of 10 Americans identify themselves as Christian), the ranks of Christians have declined as the segment of people with no religion has grown. Those who self-identify as atheist, agnostic or of no particular faith grew from 16 percent to nearly 23 percent in the past seven years. So there are many people around us for whom the question "where is Jesus" on this Ascension Sunday would be meaningless. They might answer: "don't know, don't care, it's irrelevant to me, because I don't believe in Jesus."

But for those of us who have faith in Jesus today, this question is a very relevant – and, in fact, is one of the most important of all faith's questions. So, to you who are believers in Jesus, I ask you the question from the perspective of faith – the belief that God, in Christ, does exist: "Where is Jesus?" Is he up in heaven, as our ascended Lord, at the right hand of God? Or is he here, in your heart, present wherever 2 or 3 are gathered in his name, in the world? Is Jesus present in the bread and wine of holy communion THROUGH FAITH, even when the bread that we eat and the wine we drink still remains bread and wine! As the reporter says on tv, "good question!"

So, what is the point that Luke is making in saying that Jesus ascended into heaven, in the presence of his disciples? One point is that Jesus is Lord, and not Caesar! And that is a crucial claim. For in those days, the Roman Emperors were looked upon as divine (or at least they claimed divinity, even when they were wicked and depraved). So Caesar Augustus was proclaimed to have ascended into heaven – the Emperor who reigned when Jesus Christ was born, in Luke chapter 2.

There were also stories shared in those days that Julius Caesar also ascended into heaven, according to legend, spread shortly after he died, by his admirers. So lest we be too hard on those pagan Romans and the ancient world, there is artwork of our own 1st President George Washington being raised into heaven as well, in the 19th century! After George Washington died, generations of Americans have looked upon “the father of our country” and deified him, as Romans deified Caesar.

But Luke was saying, with the early Church, that it was JESUS who was ruler of the earth, and not the Emperor, or Caesar, or Hitler – those were human beings, clearly not divine. It was a challenge to the absolute power claimed by earthly rulers. This was, of course, a ridiculous, audacious claim to be made by a small, Jewish sect about its leader, who in life had been a commoner (not royalty), a carpenter then itinerant preacher, who was betrayed, arrested, tried and condemned to death, crucified like a common criminal or slave, dead and buried. How could such a person, who had no recognized political power – who had been executed by the Romans - be more powerful after his death than the ruler of those who had executed him? Ascended into heaven? Jesus? How audacious a claim!

The claim by his followers that Jesus had been raised from the dead was always suspect and scoffed at by the elite class, and by those in power – and still is! Though human leaders today may claim to be “Christian”, and pray to a risen and ascended Lord Jesus, in reality, the idea that a person like Jesus, who stood for God’s justice, and compassion for the poor, who put politicians in their place, and said his kingdom was not of this world, is always dangerous to those in power! Because it means that God is really in charge, and we are not. That was the claim of those early, first century Christians, which was truly dangerous, because it could cost them their lives! To say that the Emperor was not divine, and God has made Jesus the ruler of this world, could mean crucifixion. To say that Jesus ascended into heaven was a politically, and religiously seditious statement, 2000 years ago.

So what does this idea that Jesus is our risen and ascended Lord, ruler of all creation, mean for us today, in an increasingly secular world, where “God” is compartmentalized, safely tucked away into sanctuaries where Christians go to pray and keep out of those “things of the world” where they don’t really belong! If Jesus is Lord, and God cares about this world around us that God has made, maybe God doesn’t mean for us to relegate our faith practice to one Sunday morning per week (or, two high holy-days per year). Then the angel’s question to the disciples after Jesus had ascended into heaven is good for us today as well: *“Men (and women) of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?”*

So, is Jesus in heaven, or is Jesus with us here in the world? Sorry - I don’t have the answer to that! But you can find evidence in the scripture that Jesus is in both places, in heaven and on earth, perhaps at the same time! You can also find evidence that he is in your heart, and in the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper.

What makes this question “where is Jesus” critical for us today is that the answer may have a lot to do with how we live out our faith in our lives, and how it influences what we do, and where we do it. If Jesus is in heaven, ruling from afar, perhaps we will be content to come to meet God in Christ through worship and prayer. The location for this worship and prayer might then primarily be in the Church, where we seek Jesus in pictures on stained glass windows, or in the words of our hymns alone. So we may then relegate our faith and worship to our time in the Church, which might be in daily prayer, but most likely in Sunday worship, once a week, or every other week, or once a month, or once a year!

Conversely, if we believe that God is present in the world, we might meet Jesus anywhere! So it is just as vital for us to live out our faith, and look for Jesus’ presence, in the people we meet out in the world, in the communities surrounding the Church, as well as here in this church building. We may also find Jesus present out in nature, in the sights, sounds, and smells, and feel God’s presence in the wind, as the Holy Spirit blew among the disciples on Pentecost and drove them outside!

One clue to where to find Jesus is to listen to the angels depicted in the scripture after Jesus had ascended, who asked the disciples “Why do you keep looking for Jesus up in the heavens?” Just before Jesus ascended, he had told them that they would receive power from the Holy Spirit, and then be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. They couldn’t do this simply staring into the heavens, could they? They had to return to Jerusalem and wait to receive this power, then go out into the world as witnesses to all that they had seen and heard, all that Jesus had taught them to do. And so it is with us.

You and I are called out into the world, outside these doors, to share the words of faith that we have heard and been taught here by God’s Word, and to go out the doors of the Church seeking Jesus’ presence, looking for Christ in our neighbor. This can be across the world – in Tanzania, in Guatemala, where our synod has partner churches and companion synods. It may also be in places where there is conflict and war, where people suffer greatly – in Africa, Nepal, in Syria, in Palestine. It may be in those boatloads of refugees coming out of Myanmar, seeking asylum in any nearby country, but rejected by everyone, now starving to death and dying of theirs on their boats, abandoned by their crews. Jesus is there, for sure, calling out to the world to take notice.

There are also examples of Jesus’ presence in our neighborhood, in the ministry done with families in need of emergency housing, as through Project Home, and in feeding hungry people through local food shelves and Loaves and Fishes. Today we may experience Jesus’ presence in the new Kab Npauj Healing Garden for which we ask God’s blessing today, that it be fruitful in providing food for people to eat, and to help us build a relationship with Hmong elders and youth in our St. Paul Community.

In all of these ways we believe, by faith, that God is with us, and Jesus is present among us in our world, often going ahead of us, leading us to works of love and compassion for one another. But most of all, we have this promise of Christ himself that he is with us today as we gather in his name. As we share the Holy Eucharist, we hear Jesus speak the words: *“This is my body, given for you; this is my blood, shed for you. Do this, in remembrance of me.”* If there is nothing else that we can be sure of, we have this promise from Jesus himself, that he is here, in this bread, and in this wine. So take and eat this bread, and drink this wine in faith today, given so that you will remember how Christ has died for you and me, and promised to give us all eternal life, through faith. Thank God for the presence of God’s Son with us today, and for this great gift of life that we have been given. Amen.