

May I speak in the name of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Being an English person in America does provoke some strong and strange reactions sometimes. There's the regular question, "Are you Australian?" Or, "South African?" Or even once, "Are you German?" I was expecting people to say things, "Oh, you're English, oh, I do love the queen," or, "I love your cathedrals," or, "Your music is my favorite," but the one thing I get more often than anything else ... and this is said to me, I'm not joking, I get this at least once a week, people say to me, "Oh, you're English, I do love Monty Python." Honestly, never a week goes past without someone saying that to me, and it's odd, because in England I hadn't thought of Monty Python for 30 years. Still seems to loom large in the American consciousness.

It happened this week and somebody went on in great detail to set out their favorite sketch, which was the Spanish inquisition. I don't know ... some of you will know that. It features a group of red-suited cardinals who keep bursting into rooms at unexpected moments, saying, "Nobody expects the Spanish inquisition." It was still amusing to this person 30 years later, as he was telling it to me.

As I've been preparing this sermon, I thought of that sketch throughout my preparation, because in these final chapters of the Gospels, and what we have today is the end of Luke's Gospel, the beginning of Acts, and they overlap with the same story of the Ascension. As the Gospels come to an end, you could imagine this phrase fitting in many times. No one expects the risen Jesus. When Mary went to the tomb on the third day, she wasn't expecting the risen Jesus. When the disciples were gathered in the upper room, after the crucifixion, no one was expecting the risen Jesus. When there were two disciples walking to a mass, no one expected the risen Jesus.

In this final resurrection appearance, as Jesus comes to his disciples and as he is taken into heaven, what we call the Ascension, he is still catching people by surprise. Just look at the question that the disciples ask Jesus in that reading we had from the Book of Acts. Jesus has been talking to them about the Kingdom of God and the promise of the Holy Spirit. The disciples ask him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom of Israel?" After all that Jesus has taught them, three years of dampening down their political aspirations, they still don't get it. They are still asking Jesus to return the nation to its former glory. Their horizons are still too

narrow. The poor disciples just don't get what's going on.

I love the way the story ends with the angel saying to them, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand, looking up towards heaven?" You could imagine them saying that, as the disciples are just standing there, slack-jawed, looking into space and Jesus has gone from their sight. They weren't expecting Jesus to go like that.

The angels go on, "This Jesus who has been taken from you into heaven will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." This promise was fulfilled at the feast of Pentecost, which we'll be celebrating here next week. Jesus did return to his disciples, as they were waiting in Jerusalem. He came in the form of his spirit and clothed them with power from on high. The confused disciples became the amazing missionaries and evangelists who were to change the course of world history.

Y'all know the Italian composer Puccini, writer of many famous operas? La bohème, Madam Butterfly, Tosca. He also wrote an opera, [and] when he started he was very ill with terminal cancer, and he began to write the opera Turandot. He started to work on it frantically, and so much that his followers said, "Well, you know, be careful because you know, you're, you're very ill and you shouldn't work so hard," but he carried on and he said to them, "If I don't finish this opera before I die, I want you to finish it." He did die in 1924, leaving the opera unfinished, and his disciples got together and they finished the score.

It was premiered at La Scala in Milan in 1926 with Toscanini, Puccini's favorite student, conducting and the opera was going beautifully. They got to the part that was Puccini's last part, the bit he'd finished writing, and the conductor put down his baton, the music stopped, he turned to the audience and said, "Thus far the master wrote, but he died." There was a long pause, no one moved, and then Toscanini picked the baton up, turned towards the orchestra and announced, "But his disciples finished his work," and they carried on, and the opera finished with a great ovation that's been performed ever since.

In the same way, the work of Jesus was carried on by his disciples. What looks almost like unfinished business at the Ascension comes to great fruition at the feast of Pentecost, when the Spirit anoints the disciplines of Jesus to do his work. Jesus returned to the disciples despite their confusion and the lack of understanding

we see in this story. Jesus still comes to his people in the midst of their confusion and inadequacy. He doesn't wait for us to sort everything out before he visits us.

The God who transforms the confused disciples into great missionaries can still transform us. God needs us to do the work of his Kingdom, what is still left to be done. What we learn from this story is that we don't have to understand everything before God uses us, and we don't have to rely on our own resources, because we too have this promise of the comfort and empowering of God's Holy Spirit.

I can't speak about the Ascension without telling you about my friend Chris. Chris is a great friend of mine, we did a lot of hiking together in our youth. Our best ever trip was to the Dolomites, these beautiful mountains in Italy, that in the war saw a lot of action, and the Italian army built a lot of what's called Via Ferrata. They made these iron walkways, they put ladders in to make sure you could get around the mountains quickly, and they bombed holes so you could get through one side of the mountain to the other.

Chris and I were walking the Via Ferrata, and we got to the end of one day, but a long day. We were both exhausted and we saw there was a tunnel going up inside the mountain. We both went in, I actually didn't get very far because the steps weren't very stable and it was very dark, and I'm not very brave. Thankfully, my friend Chris is. He volunteered to go on. I waited at the entrance and he went on, and I heard him go for a bit and then it all went quiet, it's all dark, I could see nothing. After 15 minutes I heard this voice, it was Chris' voice saying, "It's okay, I'm standing at the top, you can come through." I followed his lead and the steps didn't feel so wobbly when I knew he'd already been up them once, although he's much smaller than me, but I didn't think about that at the time.

That's an image of the Ascension. Jesus has gone before us and taken our humanity to be with him in the heavenly places. He has blazed the trail and calls us to follow him. The writer to the Hebrews puts it like this, "Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

Jesus has gone through the heavens. The one who was crucified is now glorified. Saint Paul says, "He has seated him at the right hand in the heavenly places." The significance of this Ascension story that we think of today is that Jesus has opened up a way for us to follow. In the words of the Te Deum he has opened the Kingdom of heaven to all believers. The Ascension assures us that in Christ there is a place in heaven for us. We too have a heavenly home. This is the hope to which God calls us in Christ Jesus.

My wonderful two children Miriam and Jacob are here today, very unusual, that all four of us are together these days and it's been great having them at home with us for the week. I have lots of hopes for them. Be they in the way of education, career, family, my greatest hope is that they'll know that their real home is in heaven. The Ascension is a story, which calls us to broaden our understanding of our lives. It invites us to consider our destiny, our future, our hopes and where lies our true home.

As we turn now to the baptism of Corinna, Luke and Arden, let us be mindful that we're setting them on a path today that leads beyond death, all the way to our home in heaven.

Amen.