

Today is the last week of the Easter season. and we're celebrating the Feast of the Ascension. In the last six weeks, we've been considering the stories of Jesus' various resurrection appearances. Today, we remember his final resurrection appearance when he goes with the Disciples and is taken from them in a cloud as he ascends into heaven, never to be seen again in bodily form. Before getting into the detail of that story, I just want to pause and reflect on the rather unusual Easter season that is drawing to a close. The liturgical calendar that we've been following in church has helped me to make sense of all the craziness that's going on everywhere. The season started on Ash Wednesday, February 26. I don't know if you can remember that far back. Feels like a world away, a different life almost. We gathered in church on Ash Wednesday and talked about all the things we were going to give up for Lent. Little did we know we were going to have to give up far more than ever we ever thought or imagined as we embarked upon the lentious Lent there's ever been. Forty days after Ash Wednesday, we come to Easter Day. We heard the message of new life, the hope of transformation, the difference that the resurrection of Jesus Christ can make.

As we've been hearing that message, reinforced in the Easter readings, it's been dawning on us during that time that there have been many changes, that things aren't going back to how they used to be. There's been a shift. There's now a new normal that we need to get used to. In church, we've been hearing about the changes that come with the hope of the resurrection. At the same time, the world has changed in ways we can never imagine. Traffic in L.A. is down 75%, pollution is clearing, the carbon levels are going down, the skies are clearer. You could park wherever you want in the village. I realized how much has changed since Ash Wednesday on a recent trip to the bank. If you'd gone to the bank on February 26, wearing a hat, sunglasses, and a bandana over your face, the security guard would soon have jumped on you and ushered you out of the door. But now when you go, the security guard won't let you into the building unless your face is covered with something like a bandana. Who'd have thought such a transformation was possible in such short a space of time.

That's the Easter question. Who'd have thought that Jesus could be raised from the dead? Who'd have thought that that new life is available to all who follow Him? Who'd have thought that it was possible? As I've

prepared my Easter sermons this season, I've found the text speaking to me in new ways that I'd never noticed before. They've resonated in this context of the pandemic. I've seen the resurrection stories in a new light, noticing things I've not noticed before. For example, when I preach on the resurrection in every other year, I've talked largely on the themes of triumph and victory. That theme is there no doubt throughout the stories. But this year I've noticed another more vulnerable thread running through all the resurrection stories. I've been aware of the fact that the events of Easter Day prompted firstly fear and misunderstanding amongst the disciples. Here they are, those same disciples, 40 days later at the final resurrection appearance of Jesus, and they're still showing signs of confusion. The story we're thinking about ends with uncertainty. We see they ask a question, which we know to be ridiculous. "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the Kingdom of Israel?" they said showing that they were still thinking in rather narrow political terms that Jesus had spent three years trying to undo.

Then Jesus leaves them hanging. He said to them, "Stay in Jerusalem. Wait there for the promised Spirit. The Spirit is coming," he says, "not many days from now." Not many days? What does that mean? It could have meant anything. The disciples were left waiting, and they didn't know how long they'd be waiting for. Well, I noticed this week that on Easter Day the disciples were huddled together in a room in Jerusalem. Here they are 40 days later being told to go back and shelter in place in Jerusalem. In a way, not much had changed. They didn't know how long they were going to be there like that. The story of the Ascension ends with the disciples trudging back to Jerusalem saying, "How long have we got to be here?" How long? How long? That's a question we're all asking ourselves. How long till this pandemic ends? And it's in this context that I want to draw out of our readings two promises that can sustain us in this time of uncertainty.

The first promise is spelled out by St. Paul in that reading from Ephesians, where he talks of the hope to which God has called you. He goes on, "God raised Jesus from the dead and seated him at His right hand in the heavenly places. The Ascension of Jesus speaks of the hope of heaven. Every Ascension Day, I like to tell the story of my friend, Chris. When we were younger, we used to do a lot of walking together. We had one glorious holiday in the Dolomites, lovely mountains in the north of Italy. During the Second World War, there

was a lot of activity up there, and the soldiers built lots of what they're called via ferrata, iron ways. So they put iron in to make ladders that you could climb up very inaccessible places. We came across one. It was a via ferrata in a tunnel that the soldiers had built. So, we'd been walking. It had been quite a long day. At the end of the day, we came to the opening of this tunnel, and we could see on the map that the path continued some way on the other side. We had to get through this tunnel. There was no other way of going up the face.

So, we stood there for a bit. Then Chris offered to go ahead. Well, I say offered. I made it quite clear that it wasn't going to be me heading into this very dark tunnel where we couldn't see very far. So, being a braver man than me, Chris went in and he soon started to climb up this ladder. He shouted back, and he was telling me that there were rungs missing. It didn't sound too promising to me. Soon he was out of earshot. I was left on my own at the bottom of this entrance to the tunnel. Chris was out of sight and out of earshot. I hung around there for about 15 minutes; it felt much longer. Then I heard, listening carefully, his faint voice shouting at the top of his lungs saying, "I've reached the top. You can do it on the ladder. It's okay. You can go ahead now," which I did. I followed him and joined him at the top, the other end of the tunnel.

There's an image there of the Ascension. Jesus has gone before us and taken our humanity to the heights of heaven. He has blazed a trail and invites us to follow Him. The Book of Hebrews calls Jesus the pioneer of our salvation. He has gone through the heavens. He who was crucified is now glorified. He calls us to share in the riches of His glorious inheritance among the saints. Jesus promised his Disciples that "in my Father's house, there are many rooms, and if I go, I go to prepare a place for you." The Ascension is the beginning of the fulfillment of that promise. Jesus has opened up a way to our heavenly home. The story of the Ascension is a story which invites us to broaden the understanding of our lives, helps us, invites us to see our lives in a broader context. It invites us to see our lives from the perspective of eternity, the hope of heaven.

The second promise that we can see beginning to be fulfilled in this story is Jesus' promise that he would not leave them alone. He says to them in John's gospel, "I will not leave you orphaned. I am coming to you," words which may not have made much sense to the disciples when they first heard them. But they probably

made more sense after the Ascension. Jesus said to them, "It's better for you that I go away. If I don't go away, the Holy Spirit will not come to you." That's why Jesus says he'll wait, wait for the coming of the Spirit. We'll be here next Sunday, celebrating the Feast of Pentecost and the wonderful fulfillment of that promise. We see that indeed God did send His Holy Spirit. Jesus returned to them in mighty power as they waited in Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit came upon the disciples in the midst of their confusion and uncertainty. God didn't wait for them to have everything sorted out. He came to them by His Spirit when they had little idea of what was going on.

The same is still true today. God comes to us by His Spirit as we are. He doesn't wait till we reach a certain level of goodness or holiness. He comes to us as we are. He still comes in the midst of our confusion and our uncertainty. We are not alone. And did you notice one word that comes in both of the readings? It's the word power. Jesus says you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you. St. Paul talks about the greatness of God's power for those who believe. The Holy Spirit still gives us, Jesus' followers, His strength and His power. We don't have to rely on our own resources to get through these difficult times. Let's be open to receiving and drawing on the resources of God's power.

I want to close just by picking up on a throwaway line that Paul has at the end of that reading from Ephesians. He just mentions the church, his body. It's a reminder that churches are not closed at this time. Church buildings might be closed, but not the church, Christ's body. We continue to live as Christ's body. We are the temples in which the Holy Spirit dwells. As we gather to worship like this, we are worshiping digitally, not virtually. There's nothing virtual about our Christian life at this time. The journey of the Christian life carries on whether we're worshiping inside a building, or not. In the midst of our uncertainty, let us continue to be a people of hope. A people empowered by God's Holy Spirit. Amen.