

The Sixth Sunday of Easter, 9 May 2010
Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard OR
The Rev'd Rags Ragan, Rector

May God be merciful to us and bless us, *show us the light of his countenance and come to us.

Those wonderful lines from the Psalm are used often in worship, and could indeed appropriately begin and end every gathering. The mercy and blessing of God are the context of everything we do. The great 50 days of Easter are meant to steep us in the mind-bending reality of resurrection life, to give us long enough not only to rejoice and give thanks for Christ's victory over sin and death, but also, and perhaps more importantly to concentrate on it long enough that it becomes the whole context of our lives. Resurrection life, life lived in God's mercy, blessing, and light.

We are in Year C of the lectionary which has the very interesting juxtaposition of the various adventures of the Apostles in the earliest days of the Church with brilliant moments from the visions of Saint John the Divine. Superficially, they seem to be remarkably dissimilar, the mundane and the otherworldly held side by side. If the juxtaposition occurred on just one Sunday it might pass unnoticed, but as it persists week after week, we are challenged to ask ourselves what these things have to do with one another and what they have to tell us about resurrection life.

One overriding truth they remind us about is that our visions of God and God's promises spur us on to do the work we are given to do – like Paul heading off to Macedonia. They also remind us that our experiences in the day-to-day life of faith inspire our imaginations to consider greater life, to think beyond what we see every day.

In all the stories from Acts we see that resurrection life has practical mundane implications. We see Peter and Paul and the others discovering the needs around them and striving to meet them. Paul travels across great distances to respond to the call of the Macedonians; Lydia offers the hospitality of her home. There are always opportunities to serve wherever and whoever we are. We cannot sit around and wait for someone else to do things. We are the ones.

Both the adventurous tales from Acts and the spectacular visions from Revelation remind us that we live not only in a post-Resurrection world, but also in a post-Ascension world. This Thursday brings the Feast of the Ascension.

For forty days Jesus ate and drank and walked and talked with his followers. We are familiar with the number forty as a kind of biblical code for 'enough'. It has been long enough to firmly root the experience of Christ's conquest over death in the consciousness of his followers. They should be ready to get on with their lives without his physical visible presence. Forty days, long enough. I am sure it did not feel anything like long enough to the followers themselves. We never want to let go of an intimate experience of God, a personal encounter with Christ. But we always have to. We come down off the mountain, out of the wilderness. And Christ ascends to the Father.

So we are left to consider what that means.

In terms of Acts, it means that they, and now we, are left to be the hands and feet of Christ. We cannot wait for him to come along and give everyone food or healing or wisdom. Peter goes to Tabitha. Paul goes to the Macedonians. We care for the ones entrusted to us.

In terms of Revelation it means that we must expand our vision of Christ from the Palestinian worker and teacher to the bright, cosmic, eternal Word of God.

After the Ascension, we look at ourselves differently and at Christ differently.

Standing on the ground looking up at the sky, we may find ourselves asking with the disciples, "Is Jesus Christ gone? Is he everywhere? Was he ever just here? What does it mean to be taken up to the right hand of God?" This is an idea that challenges us to examine our relationship with Christ and our responsibilities to God.

Among other things, it reminds us that peak experiences don't last. Ideally we enjoy the blissful, huge experiences without worrying that they will end.

Whether we are in a transcendent moment or an ordinary one, we are invited to live the ordinary in the context of the extraordinary, the work of Acts in the context of the visions of Revelation. We are called to be totally present, giving all of our attention to the people and concerns of the moment, while holding the light of Christ, the vision of the heavenly Jerusalem, in our hearts.

The opening hymn says that "the star of my life is Jesus." If that is true, the light that is everywhere in the heavenly Jerusalem shines on our paths wherever we go. We bring the light into the lives of others.

Yesterday was the feast day of Dame Julian of Norwich, who brought God's light into many lives during those dark years of the Black Plague in 14th and 14th century England, and whose writings continue to bring light into the minds and hearts of people centuries later. She

lived that continual interplay between extraordinary encounters with God and ordinary work in the world.

Dame Julian always reminds me of my friend and seminary classmate Jean Rutherford, because we studied Julian together and because Julian's insights were at the heart of my sermon at Jean's ordination.

Jean was small and thin, somewhat delicate in appearance, not the sort of person one would imagine ministering among the criminally insane. But just as Paul heard the call of the Macedonians and went off to minister to them, so Jean heard the call from Vacaville and Atascadero, and spent her years of ministry there, with Charles Manson and many other terrifying people, bringing comfort and light into very dark places behind locks and guards.

I was privileged not only to preach at Jean's ordination, but also to be the MC, which in church means the person who organizes the liturgy and makes sure everyone is where he belongs at each point. It was very interesting to create such a liturgy in the chapel of Vacaville, where everything and everyone had to go through all the gates and doors and scrutinies. It was a wonderful, unique worship experience, in which Jean was welcomed into her priesthood by friends – and guards – and inmates who might never leave.

It was truly an experience of Christ being the light, shining everywhere for everyone.

I concluded that sermon with Julian's assurance that no matter what might happen at Vacaville or Atascadero or in our own lives, that all would be well and all would be well and all manner of thing would be well.

That is the center of John's Revelation, as we have been hearing in different ways, week after week: everything will be alright, healed, will be restored to God's Shalom – no more tears, no more enmity, no more night, no more division, no more persecution. There will be nothing accursed in God's kingdom.

This promise of brightness everywhere for everyone was especially needed and especially challenging in this context of prisoners. Jean's unique gifts gave her the credibility she needed among this unusual population. What none of us knew then was how short Jean's time of ministry would be. After just a few years, Jean was found to have terminal breast cancer. Her last months were spent in great pain and suffering. But the Lamb who is the light of the City of God shone in her heart always. When we gathered for her funeral, we were reminded of Julian's assurance.

Come plague epidemics, and all shall be well.

Come breast cancer, and all shall be well.

Come any manner of struggle or tribulation or even death, and all manner of thing shall be well.

On Thursday (or if you celebrate with us at our Wednesday Eucharist) when you hear that Christ vanished from their sight, do not think, "Christ is gone." Think rather, "Christ is returned into the heart of God, and all that is perfectly human is now part of God." We all have a part in that light of the heavenly Jerusalem and we can carry it into the darkest places of our own lives and of the world. We know that we can pray with confidence the prayer of the psalmist:

May God be merciful to us and bless us, *show us the light of his countenance and come to us. Amen.