

Witnesses of the Wondrous
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After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. “This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me, for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power, when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, “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.”

Acts 1:6-11

You can get there from here, though there's no going home. Everywhere you go will be somewhere you've never been. Try this: head south on Mississippi 49, one-by-one mile markers ticking off another minute of your life. Follow this to its natural conclusion – dead end at the coast, the pier at Gulfport where riggings of shrimp boats are loose stitches in a sky threatening rain. Cross over the narrow beach, 26 miles of sand dumped on the mangrove swamp – buried terrain of the past. Bring only what you must carry – tome of memory, its random blank pages. On the dock where you board the boat for Ship Island, someone will take your picture: the photograph – who you were – will be waiting when you return.

The name of this poem is “Theories of Time and Space.” It is the work of a young Mississippian, Natasha Trethewey, our latest Pulitzer Prize-winning writer, now professor of creative writing at Emory University. She helps us in this General Conference-ending, early May Ascension-experiencing day. She helps us gaze upon this fleeting moment.

The Ascension is a fleeting moment in scripture. A mystery. A wonder.

Divine mysteries: The transcendent yet present God, the human yet divinely victorious Jesus Christ, and the promised Holy Spirit.

Holy wonders: Jesus with us, Jesus gone from us, Jesus presented alive among us, Jesus vanishing from our sight.

The moment of the Ascension -- and much of the holy narrative of scripture -- is told as if it has a vertical dimension. Up and down, down and up: down in Advent and Incarnation, up toward Christmas song and Epiphany star, down into temptation, up into healing and casting out demons and the press of praising multitudes, down into hometown resistance and frowning religious authority, up to the Transfigured moment, down to face increasing opposition, up to Jerusalem, down the Palm Sunday road, up on the cross, down into the tomb, up in resurrection, down walking in the garden and emerging in closed rooms and cooking fish by the sea, up in ascension.

It is a bit dizzying, all this up and down, back and forth.

The temptation is to go with the texts up and down. Why DO they stand looking up? Is looking up a good thing or a bad thing? Were they right or wrong?

No! It is not about up and down, good and bad, yes and no. It is the revealing of a wonder, of a deep, rich, glorious truth: God is always going and coming, seemingly present then seemingly absent.

God's movements are dizzying only if we try to make wonder explicable, sensible, logical. The directions of the spirit defy our words, are too rich for our imagination. No up/down, yes/no. Every movement of God is a holy wonder: incarnation, passion, resurrection, ascension. Every movement of God is blessed.

We do not explain them. We do witness them

In Zimbabwe on a Sunday after Hurricane Katrina, in a United Methodist Church someone asked, "Where is Mississippi? Which way is Mississippi?" Lloyd Nayota said, "That way." He pointed north and west. The congregation rose and lifted their hands and eyes toward Mississippi and prayed.

I gaze upon that wonder, day by day, even this day -- God's movement in that moment, in that place, among God's people.

The red letters of the text proclaim the mystery: "You will be baptized by the Holy Spirit not many days from now. It is not for you to know what God has set by God's authority. You will receive power when the Spirit comes. You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Eugene Peterson says it wonderfully: “You do not get to know the time and the details. What you do get is the Holy Spirit!”

The Spirit comes into our up/down, inside/outside, win/lose, right/wrong, yes/no, majority/minority world.

The Ascension text is the one our very unimaginative forebears in the pre-reformation church used to hammer Galileo who proposed that the world was not flat, not flat at all. They could not imagine it another way than flat. “Oh,” said the Church, “it is flat. The world is flat. How else might Jesus have gone up?”

In our tense, demanding, dangerous world, this text is challenging. It is particularly hard for people like all of us -

Wait here for the promise of God. . . Wait? I don’t think so. I am a self starter. I make things happen.

It is not for you to know. . . I want to know! I have the right to know. I have the capacity to know. I demand to know. In fact, I do know!

You will receive power. . . I have power and I use it often and well.

You will be my witnesses. . . Witnesses? Is that all? Witnesses?

The words of Jesus take us to a new, humble, receptive place. Wait. . . be content not to know. . . receive. . . witness. Up and down is expanded to richer, more complex movements. The movement of God and God’s Spirit moves in circular, elliptical. These movements are like fire and wind. God envelopes us, engulfs us, overwhelms us. This powerful spirit is coming: stay, linger, release, watch, wait.

The child Lily in Sue Monk Kidd’s novel, Secret Life of Bees is helped by her welcoming, wise, nurturing mentor August. “What does it mean that Mary ascended,” the child asks. August, looking at the honey covered Madonna, answers, “Oh, Lily, when Mary ascended, she did not go up, up, up. She went in, in, in.” August says this with her hand on her heart.

With hands on our hearts, let us ask ourselves: Have we experienced the fullness of God’s grace? Who were we on April 23? Who are we on this early May day? Is today’s photograph fresh, emergent, new? What have we learned? In this moment, not what have we decided, but what have we learned?

Have we opened our hearts in new ways? Have we sensed deep and surprising bonds with others? Have our thoughts and opinions been tempered by our hearts? Have we dreamed of new ways of gathering and discerning?

My favorite photograph of my beloved Mike was taken in Afghanistan. He is with a small group of Afghani men. They all have their hands over their hearts. They are greeting one another in the picture, using the customary greeting of the men – right hand extended, then placed over the heart.

As he and others distributed grain in Afghanistan in November, three months after the Sept. 11 attack on the World Trade Center in New York, there was a tense moment. A man appeared without a ticket for food. The villagers had developed a system to assess those with greatest need. Tickets had been given to the most destitute and a bag of grain was given to those with tickets. The ticket-less man pleaded, his anxiety and hunger and fear obvious without translation of his words. Villagers held guns on nearby roofs. Tension mounted. The moments were still, long, silent, agonizing. Then, from out of the crowd of ticket-holders a man stepped forward. His bag of grain was full. He held an empty bag and opened it. As his son held the empty bag, he scooped a handful of grain from his own into the empty bag. Others stepped forward, following his example. Handful by handful, the empty bag was filled. The guns were lowered. The man without a ticket was given provision.

It was a wonder.

Gaze upon the wondrous. Live forward into our days alert, aware, alive. Lay down our heavy certainties. Feel the wind of the spirit. Sense the rising in our hearts of hope. Be adventurers in the life of faith, of hope, of love.

Live this story onward, always. Live gently, receiving all God's good gifts. Unclasp our hands. Lay down our weapons. Allow our efforts to lie dormant. Be content not to know.

This is the posture of receptivity God seeks in us as we complete our time of conferencing together.

Ascension Day waiting is different in character from the waiting of Advent for the Incarnation, different from the waiting of Lent for Resurrection. The waiting of Ascension is even more wondrous: this one who came to us continues to come to us. We have only begun to see the victory of Christ crucified and alive. The Spirit is about to come upon us, bringing more than we have hoped or dreamed or imagined. The Spirit is about to come, in places and ways that leave us speechless, full of wonder and gratitude and joy.

Into our yes/no, up/down, win/lose world Jesus continues to come. Wonder is not captured by voting machines, with yes/ no/abstain buttons, with 10 seconds allowed to press. Win/lose, up/down, left/right. 38-years-by-the pool church, we wait. 18-years-bent-over, we wait. In God's time, not ours to know, the Spirit comes. In God's way, not ours to know, the Spirit comes.

Let us give thanks for the powerful gentleness of God, for God says to us – those of us who feel we have won and those of us who feel we have lost, those of us who feel

powerful and those of us who feel powerless, those of us who feel affirmation and those of us who feel negation – to all of us God says “You will receive power when the Spirit comes. . .”

God’s ways are always a mystery.

Our cabinet joined a team from Rocky Mount, NC, for work on a damaged home in Biloxi, Mississippi. She let go and entered into the space of waiting on God, on this morning of her team’s departure, as she prayed, “Lord, send others now after us to this place.”

Her prayer was a wonder.

I keep in my pocket always a shard of broken pottery from Gulfport. You received a shard on Monday morning as a gift and an invitation to mission in Judea and Samaria and all places.

As the shards were brought forward at Heritage United Methodist Church in D’Iberville, MS, a woman brought a bent spoon. She said, “Since the storm I have kept this bent spoon. For some reason, I have not been able to throw this spoon away. For some reason. Until now. I’m ready to let it go, let it go to someone at the General Conference.”

I am in awe of her witness. “I’m ready to let it go, let it go to someone at the General Conference.”

God is powerfully with us. Christ ascends. The Spirit comes.

So, this day, let go: Wait. Watch. Receive.

Gaze on this cross. Up and down and outward. With a beautifully swirling center. Gaze upon it. It is a wonder.