

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on May 24, 2020 (Easter 7A)**

Most of you know that I'm something of a coffee geek. This is not a great news flash, I realize. When people ask the question, "What's the one thing you miss the most during this time," my first answer is always 'going to the coffee shop.' You have no idea, by the way, how difficult it's been to write sermons from some place other than Redeye Roasters (but we all have our crosses to bear).

One of the things I've done during this time is tried out a new brewing method. I've started experimenting with what's known as a coffee siphon and it's kind of awesome. It's a full immersion method, kind of like a reverse French press, but with the glass tubes and beakers and butane burner, it's more like chemistry class meets *Breaking Bad*.

Now, I don't fully understand the science involved, but as the water gets heated up it miraculously rises into the upper chamber where you add the freshly ground beans. The heat is then removed, the coffee drips back down through a cloth filter, and you're left with a beautiful, clean, delicious cup of coffee.

I mention this because all I could think of as I was experimenting with my new toy this week was Jesus' ascension. Sometimes we get caught up in the physics of it all, and thereby lose the ramifications of it all. The fact that Jesus is *with God* is the point — not the means by which he got there. Rational beings attempting to parse out the miraculous never goes very well. Which isn't to minimize the role of scientific inquiry, something we need now more than ever these days, but rather to emphasize the fact that we don't have all the answers. Mystery abounds in life, in faith, in coffee preparation.

One of the other stumbling blocks surrounding the ascension is that we usually associate *up* with *away*. It's one of the reasons children cry when they accidentally let go of their helium balloon at an outdoor carnival. There's that sense that when something floats away it is gone forever. And that usually is the case.

But the Ascension of Jesus is different. It's not up and away, but up and being present in a new way. This is why in Luke's account of this event, when Jesus is carried up into heaven, we hear that the disciples "returned to Jerusalem with great joy." They're not weeping and mourning, as you might expect, but rather joyous and hopeful.

And I think this time in our own situation as a community of faith parallels some of this. Just as Jesus is up but not away, so are we apart but still together. We are bound to one another in a way that defies logic and physics and all rationality. By every practical indicator our community should be fractured and divided, rather than tied together and united. But here we are. Missing one another, but loving one another more than ever. Wanting to be in the same space with one another, but connecting with one another in new ways. Hoping to be reunited with one another, but caring for one another by keeping physically apart.

There's been a lot of talk about religious freedom this past week. It's gotten politicized, of course, but there's a push to open churches because there's a perceived God-given right to worship. I see in this moment, however, a God-given responsibility to love one another, to love our neighbors, to continue to shine a light upon the economic and racial disparities playing out right before our very eyes, as this pandemic unfolds.

And I've tried to be clear about this from the very beginning. While the *doors* of the church are closed, the church itself is wide open. We are worshipping and praying and caring for one another; we are feeding the hungry and making masks and donating blood; we are preaching and teaching and forming disciples. We are serving as God's hands and heart in this community and beyond, because that's what we do as people of faith. The doors may be closed, but our hearts and minds and souls are open to being the church in new and creative ways. And that will continue to be the case no matter how long we refrain from in-person worship. We will continue to love one another by not being with one another. At least for now.

But, believe me, I understand the disappointment and the longing. Tinged with the joy of Jesus' ascension and the fulfillment of his ministry, was the disciples' grief in no longer being able to be with him in the ways that were familiar. Of not walking the earth with him and hearing his words and looking into his eyes and breaking bread with him.

There continues to be a bittersweet element to our online gatherings — and I get that. As much as we all love drinking coffee during church and wearing fuzzy slippers and having the ability to mute the preacher, we'd all much rather be together in person! We want things to go back to the way they were, even as we know that is unlikely. Even as we know that things will be different in the months and possibly even years ahead. We all yearn to hear congregational singing and receive the sacrament and hug one another. For human beings built for ritual and touch, this has all been disconcerting and even frightening.

Yet at the very heart of the Christian faith is sacrifice. The whole reason that Christians gather is to recall the sacrifice of our Lord upon the cross; to partake in the sacrificial meal instituted at the Last Supper. And so this time apart can be seen as a willing sacrifice we are making in order to show love for one another and for the larger community. It's not easy. But no one ever said that walking the way of the cross would be the way of comfort or ease.

Those joyful disciples who journeyed back to Jerusalem would face persecution and derision for their faith. Some would be martyred. But they never lost hope. They never lost the desire to deepen their relationship with Jesus and to know him in new ways. They dearly missed him, but they channeled this grief into love for one another. Which is precisely what we're being asked to do in this moment.

We *will* get to the other side of this. And the faith of those first disciples offers us a roadmap — a spiritual guide to navigating the emotional roller coaster of living out our faith amid confusion and uncertainty. The love they had for Jesus, the love they had for one another saw them through a difficult time. And it will see us through as well.