

When I was yet in High School, I toyed with the idea of becoming an artist. My senior year I was allowed to take some classes at the Massachusetts College of Art. After a while, I was advised that, while I had the “visual capacity” to become an artist, my “technical proficiency” would suggest that another career path might better suit me. Which was fine, because ever since eighth grade I had known that I was going to become a Pastor.

I mention that slight deviation from my journey to clergydom to underscore that I did learn a little something about art through those classes. Some years ago, my wife and I ventured to the Cleveland Art Museum for the *Rembrandt in America* exhibit, and were delighted by that presentation on how the artist himself developed, and also how others imitated him. Most of the Rembrandts brought to this country were portraits, or what are referred to as character studies; in the exhibit there were only two paintings on Biblical themes.

Paintings on Biblical themes are sources of some dismay for me. When I produce my own bulletin covers, I scour the internet for artwork to insert that is drawn from the Gospel narrative for that week. There is an awful lot of really cheesy artwork out there. There are also some brilliant pieces (I, of course choose the cheesy ones . . . not really). Yet, in the main, my dismay is that so much of the art that depicts events in the Bible is way too stilted. Some of that is due to the fact that the artwork suitable for bulletin covers is two-dimensional, so there is that limitation. It is hard to depict action in a freeze-frame moment.

But my objection (if that’s not too strong a word) is that way too many paintings are just too . . . pious. Take, for example, depictions of the Day of Pentecost (which we will celebrate a week from Sunday; take a close look that morning at the bulletin covers at your worship services). In almost every painting of the events of that day, the mood is one of stasis. The disciples stand with folded hands, eyes looking skyward, while little tufts of flame sit just above their heads.

I think not. First, there was the wind, powerful enough to attract the attention of the entire city to come take a look at what was going on (that was one noisy wind!). Luke tells us this wind filled the room, yet no painting shows so much as a tussled hairdo! And I don’t know about you, but if fire starts dancing around in this space? I’m on the floor under the pews.

So likewise, Luke’s accounts of the Ascension. Painting after painting shows the disciples with folded hands and only mildly surprised looks on their faces — as if

they had been expecting this all along, and had encountered such happenings on a regular basis. The exceptions to this pattern are the artworks that focus on Jesus alone, and those that have gone completely abstract — in most cases there is an energy to these pieces that is welcome.

Now, some of you may be sitting there thinking, “*Well, so that?*” So some fourteenth-century artist lacked “technical proficiency” to depict the events to the liking of the Reverend Doctor Christian Just. No, my concern is only partially aesthetic; it is also pastoral. I grew up with this pious artwork on the front cover of every Sunday’s Sunday School lesson handout, and it shaped me early on.

I fear it still shapes people today, because it sets the tone for how we engage the Biblical text. How we read the text! Now I know there is a school of thought that argues that the public reading of the Bible should be as bereft of intonation as is humanly possible (hence our First Lesson this evening “should” have been read: “*... as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.*”). But that removes all the drama from the account. The Gospels are stories; why not read them as the narratives they are, instead of dissecting them into frog-like parts, analyzing the bits, and leaving untouched by the experience? When even the accompanying artwork is boring — or worse, deceitful! — is it not time to change?

So let’s come at this familiar Ascension account with fresh ears and fresh eyes.

First the context. Jesus had been dead, and now risen, He has spent the last forty days with the Twelve. Throughout His ministry, Jesus had made the disciples very uncomfortable. He said things like “*Deny yourself...*” and “*Turn the other cheek...*” and “*Pluck out your eye...*” I doubt very much if they sat there on such occasions and responded, “*Yes. Yes. I see. That is certainly something to take under consideration.*” If I had the technical proficiency to paint a picture of those moments, the disciples jaws would be agape, they’d be looking at each other with their shoulders lift high and their hands outstretched as if to say, “*What the heck is he talking about?*” I see a dozen of their hands up in the air seeking to ask questions. I hear muttering and murmuring as they begin to wonder if they had signed on with the wrong rabbi.

When I was taking art classes, I did a portrait of Jesus; I painted him bald. My rationale was this: If I had to deal with those disciples, I’d have ripped all my hair out! Time and again the disciples showed themselves to be dense, unaware, or just not paying attention. Jesus once had to say to Philip: “*Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the*

Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’ [John 14:9] If we need more evidence, listen to them at the Mount of Ascension: **“Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?”** I can easily imagine Jesus’ shoulders slumping in despair. Will they ever get it?

This is why He instructed them: **“Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about.”** After careful reading of the Gospel texts, I am inclined to hear this word from Jesus as: *“Don’t do anything. Don’t mess up! You don’t know what you’re doing, but you will. So stay put. Got it? Stay put and don’t do anything!”* Then He leaves. David Lose, Professor at Luther Seminary, St. Paul notes that the theme here could easily be *“Left behind for good!”* The disciples had no guarantee that Jesus had not left them entirely.

Ascension Day, then, is a day to learn what faith is all about.

One comment I have heard from parishoners (and others) over the years is the one about how the disciples had an advantage over us because they were actually there. I think it’s just the opposite. As events unfolded, there were ample reasons for the disciples simply to toss their hands in the air, and announce, *“I’m outta here!”* Jesus talks about being handed over, killed, rising — what? Was He nuts? Then He gets Himself arrested, tried, killed . . . and, as the disciple on the road to Emmaus express it, *“. . . we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.”* You can hear in that the despair, the disappointment, the anguish that all such hope was lost. Their hope had been misplaced, or so they had concluded.

Hadn’t they been listening? He had told them just weeks before, **“The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”** They had it easier because they were there? No! We have that advantage. We know how the story ends — they had no clue! We have the vantage point of thousands of years — they had none. We have heard these accounts over and over, year after year, Sunday after Sunday . . . some of us have it practically committed to memory — they had only what they could see, hear, smell, taste, and feel. And now here they stand once again, watching this man with whom they had traveled for three years, at whose feet they had listened, watched as He healed, walked on water, turned a small lunch into a massive feast, had (quite literally, we confess) seen Him go through hell and now they watch Him rise out of sight.

Here’s where the faith part comes in (it is the verse immediately following today’s First Lesson, and should be part of it): **“Then they returned to Jerusalem . . .”**

There had been other occasions when the disciples' faith peeked through the dense fog that seemed to surround them. They went and secured the donkey at Palm Sunday. They told the crowd to sit down for the Feeding of the Five Thousand. They prepared the meal in the Upper Room. They went out two-by-two with the commission to speak "Peace" where they went. And what do these episodes have in common with the Ascension? In every case they did what Jesus told them to do.

In this instance, they went back to the city. They could have taken a look at each other and concluded, "*Well, that's that! It was a nice trip. Not unhappy I was along for the ride; but it's time to pack it in.*" Okay, they had a little prodding. The guys in white (who are they? How do you know? Luke doesn't say so!) emphasize the very thing that must have been on their minds. If you were standing there, instead of sitting here, seeing all this for the very first time, instead of hearing about for the umpteenth time, what one question would be uppermost in your mind? I think that question would have been: "*Will we ever see Him again?*"

With that question looming over them, "*. . . they returned to Jerusalem . . .*" With nothing but uncertainty before them, "*. . . they returned to Jerusalem . . .*" With only the slightest promise to cling to, "*. . . they returned to Jerusalem . . .*" I put it before you: That is faith, but not at all easy.

Jesus had told them, "*. . . it is to your advantage that I go away . . .*" At that moment, I'm willing to guess that they could see very little advantage in Jesus' departure. He had told them, but they really could not comprehend what He meant when He said it, "*for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.*" Think about that for a moment. Jesus might as well have told them they were about to have an encounter with a unicellular dinoflagellate algae. Who had a clue what this Advocate (Greek παρακλήτος paraklytos) was about — Jesus did; but the disciples? Not one scintilla of insight.

Yet, "*. . . they returned to Jerusalem . . .*"

Our family was increased by the addition of our third granddaughter, Milla (unfortunately, when she was five we lost Milla to what turned out to be a congenital problem with her heart). What did Milla have to do to become part of our family? Nothing! She just showed up. Were we happy with her? Absolutely! Did we love her? As unconditionally as we were able. Was she part of the family? Without question. Before she could do or say anything — she was in.

Were we content to see Milla remain forever the helpless infant she was upon entry into our lives? No! We wanted her to grow. We rejoiced at first tooth, first steps,

first solid food (we accepted the first messy diaper, we did not rejoice in it). We awaited her first words (with a small amount of anxiety, because experience had taught us that once they start talking it's hard to shut them up). We looked forward to her journey through childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, and now wish that she was still around so that we could see her mature into womanhood.

How does that fit here? Just so. There was nothing Milla needed to do or could do to make herself part of the family. In God's family that is called "grace" — we're in! We show up, God embraces us, we step into the embrace. But to get to womanhood there are lots of things that Milla would have had to do — learn to walk, to do multiplication, write cursive (okay, maybe by the time she got into school, cursive may have already been replaced by texting), drive a car, and on and on and on.

The disciples, by virtue of their call (remember, "*Follow me.*"?) were in. Jesus taught them. Indeed He prayed to His Father, "*Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.*" But knowing that foundational truth obviously did not mean that they comprehended all it meant to continue as followers of Christ. Now came the time for them to move from childhood through to adulthood . . . He told the disciples, ". . . *stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.*" and ". . . *they returned to Jerusalem . . .*"

In the waters of Baptism, by God's call, you're in! Now the process continues to grow into that person God has called you to be. Pay close attention to Paul's prayer for the Ephesians (1:15-27); — it is prayer for you as well — that you may realize the hope, the riches, the greatness, the enlightenment — and may comprehend that God has done all He has done in Christ for you: the Church.

So we cannot stand looking upward; we cannot be like the static forms in oil on canvas, frozen in time, with pious auras our constant lot. We need to be about the tasks Christ has assigned us. The first task is to wait on God to know the direction He desires us to take. This is no passive stance; look at the disciples: They "*returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God.*" Waiting on the Lord takes great energy, attention, focus, time. But then we must follow the direction He sets for us: wait when He says wait; and then move when He says, "Move." The disciples had an advantage over us? No way! They had to stay in the city until they were — as we have already been — "*clothed with power from on high.*" Amen.