

Alleluia, Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

This past Thursday was the festival of the Ascension, celebrating Jesus' return to the Father forty days after his resurrection. When I was in my previous congregation, we always had an ecumenical Ascension service that we shared with the local Episcopal and Roman Catholic churches. A few years back we tried for a couple of years to get something going among the three ELCA church here in town, but that has fallen by the wayside. And we're not the only ones who have trouble getting people to church on a Thursday evening. My mother reported that attendance was pretty sparse at her church on Thursday, and they do *all* the church festivals without fail. In recent decades even many Roman Catholic dioceses in the US have moved the observance of Ascension to the following Sunday, and that's kind of what our lectionary allows us to do, giving us the account of Jesus' ascension from the book of Acts. But with that in mind, what I really want to focus on is our Gospel reading this morning from John. And Jesus' return to the Father in John is less straightforward and more paradoxical than the Ascension that Luke writes about.

I saw a meme this week, using a classical painting of the ascension, with Jesus being lifted up into the clouds and the disciples watching from below. And the caption said, "Celebrating the Ascension, when Jesus started working from home." It's cute. But if it leaves you with the impression that Jesus is up in heaven now e-mailing and phoning and zooming with us from a distance, then we've missed something important about how John's Gospel understands our continuing relationship with Jesus after his resurrection and return to the Father. For John that relationship is paradoxical. Jesus goes to the Father so that he can come to us. In chapter 14 that we read two weeks ago we heard Jesus talk about going to prepare a place for us, as if his home and our home are up in heaven. But then later in the chapter he says that he and the Father will come and make their home with us. This chapter that we're reading from today now fleshes that out. It's known as Jesus' High Priestly Prayer. We get roughly a third of it in each of the three years of the lectionary cycle on this Sunday. So this year, in year A, we're back at the beginning. The prayer has three main focuses, the first is on Jesus' relationship with the Father, the second is on Jesus' relationship with his disciples, and the third is on the disciples' relationship with the world, which let's not forget is the target of God's mission in Jesus. "For God so loved the world..." Two of those focuses appear in today's reading, and it is worth taking a closer look at them and then pointing to the third focus that they lead to.

Jesus begins this prayer praying for himself and his relationship with the Father. And he's praying out loud, within earshot of the disciples. This is maybe the most confusing part of a confusing reading, and I will admit to being frustrated by it in the past, because it can feel like Jesus is talking in circles and not saying anything. He is asking the Father to glorify him so that he may glorify the Father. And we just don't talk like that. But what is really happening here is that Jesus is preparing for the finale of his incarnational project – his crucifixion. And this is almost like a pep talk before a big game. "Let me do a good job of this, so I can make you proud" is kind of what he is saying. "Let us finish this task and show the world our love, so that no one has to perish, so that they can believe and have eternal life." And then he goes on to say what eternal life is. And it's not so much about "unending life" that we think when we here "eternal." It's really about a new quality of life, "life that really is life," to quote 1 Timothy (6:19). Let me be clear about this, though. I'm not denying the everlasting part. I think it's pretty clear that the life Jesus

talks about is unending. But it's not the focus of this word "eternal" in the Greek. This is about new life in the new creation that God is bringing about in Jesus. It is life that is rich and meaningful and, most importantly, relational. This new kind of life that Jesus brings is about "knowing" another. It is an intimate sharing and connectedness. That is what Jesus and the Father have with each other. It's so intimate that Jesus could tell Philip in our reading two weeks ago, "if you have seen me, you have seen the Father."

This then sets up the second focus of Jesus' prayer, his relationship with the disciples. In the time that he has been with them he has made God known to them – God's name, God's way, God's character. Jesus' teachings and works have all been about that: new birth, living water, bread of life, sight replacing blindness, the shepherding relationship, and even life called out of the tomb where death once ruled. All this that Jesus has shared with them – which has been a major component of our readings throughout Lent and the Easter Season – is who God is and what God is bringing into the world through Jesus. So, in his prayer Jesus is establishing that the disciples are now part of this relationship. Just as he is about to leave them. But, paradoxically, he is leaving them so that he can come to them and be with them. And this is the answer to the mystery of the Ascension. Why wouldn't Jesus stick around after his resurrection to rule over the new creation? That is the burning question that lurks behind the Ascension story. John's answer to that question in his portrayal of Jesus and his relationship with the Father is that even though he has been sent into the world by the Father, he has actually never left the Father because he and the Father are one. Jesus is cooking up precisely the same kind of relationship with the disciples. The relationship that he has drawn them into, which is eternal life – that new way of living and thinking and trusting – is the same kind of relationship, the same kind of life, that he has with the Father. It continues and endures across space and time. His last words in today's part of the prayer ask that "they may be one as we are one."

And that brings us to the third focus of this prayer that we don't really get yet in our reading today, but which we have to talk about because it's where this is all leading. In praying about the disciples in the part of the prayer we do get, Jesus says he is not praying for the world but only the ones the Father has given him – in other words his disciples and the others who have believed. But later in the prayer he does pray for the world, for those who will come to believe through the disciples and their witness. And this is the point of the unity that Jesus is praying for. His goal for us who believe in him is that we may be one as he and the Father are one, so that just as seeing Jesus is seeing the Father for us, so seeing us will be seeing Jesus for the world, for those who have not yet come to believe and trust in him.

What we see in Jesus is him giving his life for the sake of the world. When we share that life that comes through our relationship with him, the world will also see us giving our life for its sake, even if it doesn't recognize that that is what is happening. In our present reality, though, the picture is more complicated, and we are both agents and recipients of God's mission. On our good days, by God's grace and mercy, and the power of the Holy Spirit, we make Jesus known by our love for one another, for our neighbor, and for the world God continues to love in Jesus. On our bad days, though, we are drawn back into the darkness and the alluring promises of division, hatred, and self-promotion. But Jesus will not give up on us. His light and life shine into our darkness and draw us back to the foot of the cross where he is lifted up for the life of the world. It is there that we see the glory of God's unconquerable love, and are drawn out of the darkness of our death-bound lives into his life that really is life, and we again manifest to the world the astonishing, life-giving good news that Christ is risen, alleluia! (Chris is risen indeed! Alleluia!)