

BEAM ME UP, SCOTTY?

Rev. Mary Barrett Speers
John 14:25-29; Acts 1:1-14

Coming up this Thursday (it's always a Thursday) is the ancient Christian Feast of the Ascension. In some parts of the world, it's the long weekend that heralds warm weather.

There's one of those Durer woodcuts I like, the Bible illustrations he did, on your bulletin cover. See all the disciples of Jesus? A group of men, in appropriately Biblical-looking robes, and they're all looking up to heaven—oh, except the one female figure on the left who's gazing straight ahead of her, with her face in shadow. That's Mary, presumably: I guess she has to stand in for the "other women" in the story, too.

And this is the part that I get such a kick out of: at the very top of the picture you can just see Jesus' feet going whoosh! up to heaven. Remember he's come back from the dead, and now he's going up to heaven, and here are the disciples still asking, "Is *this* when you are going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" *Really?* I always think Jesus looks up to heaven but not because he's all religious or anything. If he's praying, it's "Beam me up, Daddy!"

Anyway, it's a wonderful picture, because it captures in a humorous and yet serious way how outrageous this idea of the Ascension really is. And indeed you look at this picture and you think, well, what's the point, anyway?

Well, remember this scenario: what if Jesus had stayed, the risen Christ had stayed on earth, I mean? Then it wouldn't be "Why stand ye there gazing up to heaven," but it would probably be something like "Why shove ye one another aside, to get to the holy shrine wherein dwelleth the risen Christ?" There probably would *be* some shrine, you know, probably in the Middle East somewhere. As if they haven't had enough tourists and wars already.

And human beings being what we are, when we start talking about something being sacred, we're well on our way to making it a sacred cow, and then milking it for all it's worth—how many sacred cows can you think of that've become big business?

So, just imagine: there would be a huge religious tourist industry built up around this shrine in the Middle East, where poor Jesus by this time would be completely imprisoned, like a full-sized living icon, in gold and precious stones and all the sorts of things we like to pile up until they completely entomb any sacred object or memory or hope that we have.

We'd have this shrine in which Jesus was imprisoned, and which, because we'd all be shoving each other aside to get to it, really would prevent us from *following* Jesus—how could we follow him anyway, if he couldn't move? If he were still bound to one place?

Now here's a really odd piece of church tradition. The last three days before the Ascension are what's called Rogation Days, or Asking Days. It's a very old tradition, and what used to happen back in medieval times when parishes were geographical (the word "parish" comes from the French word for "border" or "margin," did you know that?) was that the whole "parish" (meaning now the people who lived in it) would walk around the boundaries of the parish, or let's say the neighborhood, in a kind of ragtag procession, and they'd pray for the farmers and the crops and the birds and the animals and the fish in the streams...everything that their gaze fell upon, however insignificant. That's noticing God in the world, and waiting, watching, listening, just to see what God will put in front of our noses next.

So nowadays, we don't have a geographical parish—at least not in the PCUSA. But we have a community to care for, and above all, as a church we are pledged to follow Jesus, and Jesus, after the Ascension anyway, transcends all boundaries. They just don't matter to him any more.

And that means, if you recognize, as I know many of you do, that our inclusion among the beneficiaries of the Gillespie Trust is one great big call from God, you'll see also that the work we have been doing, especially our Community Forums last Thursday and this coming Tuesday, are kind of like walking the boundaries of the “parish” and asking God what we should be noticing, what we should be praying for, what we should be doing something about.

So right before we watch Jesus go up to heaven and get enthroned on the Right Hand of the Almighty and so forth, think of ourselves honoring the tradition of Rogation Days in our community meetings, praying for every atheist and beast and plant we see, the folks working too hard and the folks who are sleeping it off someplace.

And here's the thing: holding people tenderly up in prayer is one of the best paths I know toward engagement with the people you're praying for—as well as giving over to God any resentments, or fears, or any other feelings you're having that you don't want to have; anything, in short, that might be holding you back from doing the things Jesus told you to do.

If you love me,” Jesus says, “keep my commandments: ...love one another as I have loved you.” And in Luke's Gospel, he's a little blunter: “Why do you cry, ‘Lord! Lord!’ and you don't do the things I say?” Worshiping Jesus is nothing less than following him. No less than doing the things he said. No matter where. No matter what.

Now today we hear Jesus say, “I must go up to heaven, because if I don't, the Spirit can't come to encourage and help all of you wherever you are.” I don't know about you, but I hear *excitement* here. As Marcus Borg so eloquently puts it, Jesus has such a passionate, life-giving relationship with the Spirit that he simply can't wait for his friends to know the Spirit, too!

So now, speaking of following, let's have another look at this woodcut. Remember Mary, who, instead of looking up to heaven, is looking instead at what's right in front of her? What is it, now, that's right in front of her?

This time, follow her gaze. Below the feet of Jesus, there's a rock, and if you follow her gaze to that rock, you'll see a pair of footprints. I really love Durer's subtlety here, that it's *Mary's gaze that draws your eye to the footprints of Jesus*. And those footprints tell us, number one, that Christ, that Jesus, really was real (born in the labor of a human woman) and that God in Christ, in the world, really happened, and that it mattered so much even rock gave way.

They tell us that, as we remember on these Rogation Days, all Creation matters to God, much more than correct theology or believing the right things about somebody you've never even seen, especially if it's something you're supposed to believe that has no significance to you or just doesn't make any sense.

And if all Creation matters to God, that has to include very different perspectives on who Jesus is, who God is, what church is, and what church is for. Which we certainly have in microcosm right here in our own church family.

So lastly, and most importantly, Mary's gaze shows us that those footprints are now waiting to be filled. Each one of us is being invited by this picture to scramble up on top of that rock and place our two feet in the footprints of Jesus. Not to be beamed up to heaven, not to stay on that rock forever on a sort of pedestal and have a temple built around us and our way of seeing God's world, but to learn Jesus' mind and heart by following where he leads us.

What does Jesus say? “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me.” And what does that mean? *Walk in the footsteps of Jesus, and we’ll learn the Way of Jesus.* Walk in those footprints as a way of understanding and becoming God in the World, in the Way Jesus labored so hard to teach us, in the Way that, just like the disciples, we are so reluctant to actually try.

And then we remember that old Native American proverb that you don’t really understand a person until you walk a mile in their moccasins. Here’s a pair of moccasins for all of us to try on for size. The good news is that, unlike Cinderella’s stepsisters, who also tried to walk in somebody else’s shoes, we can be guaranteed that no part of us, no vital part, will have to be removed in order for them to fit.

On the contrary, we’ll have to grow, and stretch, in order to fit into these shoes. We’ll have to walk around the neighborhood first, to get in shape for climbing the mountain.

But we can be, we will be, we *shall* be God in the world if we walk in the moccasins of Jesus, loving one another, loving our neighbor—being, as Jim Wallis and Rick Ufford-Chase have put it, “Matthew 25 Christians.” Anxiety will give way to joy. I promise.

So, let’s walk around a bit. Pray for each other. More than that: make a point of praying for whomever might be annoying you the most these days—at work, at home, or even in church. Pray for God’s best will for them. And pray for discernment: maybe it’s even God’s plan for *you* to do something to bring that about for them.

You might wish to be anywhere other than where you are right now. But don’t ask to be “beamed up;” instead, ask for more patience, more strength, more connections, more insight, more wisdom. Ask for Spirit Power. It’s the best gift of all.

Pray for our church and community, near and far, and especially those on the margins. Tend your fields. Mend your fences. Build your bridges. And even when you’ve had enough: still patiently, attentively, *wait*. Think how long God has been waiting for *you*!

AMEN.