



Sermon for Third Sunday of Easter, April 2023

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene Kristin Keyes

Acts 1:6-14 1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11 John 17:1-11

Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of *your* faithful and *kindle* in us the fire of *your love*.

In her book "The Hiding Place," author Corrie ten Boom recollected her time in the Ravensbrück concentration camp where she and her sister were interned for hiding Jews from the Nazis in Holland during the World War II. Her sister died in that camp. Corrie visited ravaged, bombed, and broken Germany in 1947 to talk about God's forgiveness. In the audience she recognized a former guard at the camp. Still in uniform. After her presentation, he came up to her and thrust his hand out. He told her he had been a guard at Ravensbrück. He did not recognize her. He went on with: "But since that time, I have become a Christian. I know God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fraulein." And his hand came out again – "will you forgive me?"

Can you imagine how she felt? The message that God forgives comes with the condition that we forgive those who have injured us.

Having prayed for Jesus' help she woodenly thrust her hand into the one in front of her. Then the amazing grace of our Lord took over. She wrote: "The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then the healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes."¹

"I forgive you brother!" I cried. "With all my heart!"¹ She went on to comment about the former guard and the former prisoner. "I had never known God's love so intensely as I did then."¹ What a joy to experience the incomprehensible power of the Spirit.

When the disciples were walking along the road to Emmaus, having just experienced events that might also be described as incomprehensible before their eyes were opened. Can we imagine the so human condition of the apparent sense of loss, lack of understanding, possibly raising questions like "Just what did happen?" "How would any of us react had we been in the same situation, where a deeply loved leader, Jesus, is put to death and yet is no longer in the tomb?" "How can this be?" "What a series of emotional ups and downs must they have been going through?" "Do we grasp it all even now?" "How confused were they?" "How confused are we sometimes?" "What are our emotional ups and downs?"

Our readings today are about Jesus not being physically on earth with us. And yet we know he is with us in Spirit. In the first lesson we read: "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." And then Jesus ascended into heaven.²

Researching in the Anglican Compass³ for more background information, the word "tension" is used several times in discussing Jesus' ascension. One quote: "So he gives us the gift of peace within that tension. We can settle into the tension of the now, knowing that we are not alone, even as we wait. Our task is to be at peace with the world as it is, while seeking to bring the transforming love of Christ into it."³

Tension? Really? But wait, stop, and think about it. Tension could describe pressure, difficulties, and feelings of anxiety when we have a task to accomplish with the deadline is approaching. Think back, did you ever experience tension in school when your homework wasn't completed? Maybe you hadn't studied enough for the exam you were going to write? Perhaps you experienced tension at work when you had to present a major proposal to the boss or a client. Could tension describe a situation of mental or emotional strain when we must deal with a challenge that we don't like? Maybe a medical diagnosis? Possibly being pulled over by an officer for speeding? Issues tend to build up and become seemingly bigger than ever the longer we wait to deal with them.

How much mental or emotional strain were the disciples going through after Jesus' ascension? Can you imagine them saying something like: "Hey, wait a minute. Where are you going? We were ready to follow you anywhere forever and do great things with you. Wait -- where are you going?" The tension might be that combination of amazement, some feeling of abandonment, and an "oh my goodness," sense of looming responsibility and uncertainty about what to do next. Maybe they said to each other "What now? Seriously?" As they began to realize that lay ahead of them – continue the work that Jesus began. After all it was a hostile crowd who put Jesus to death. What a daunting task ahead of them.

So how much anxiety or emotional strain do we have now as we learn, read, pray for guidance at this holy time? We are human after all. We get the news and the world around us seems to be in an awful mess, with wars, competition between nations, political upheaval, and antagonism in our country and in others. How should we behave? What is God telling us through this time that we should be doing? Perhaps heaven is here now! How do we like it? How do we handle it? A sentence from the Anglican Compass states rather simply: "Our task is to be at peace with the world as it is, while seeking to bring the transforming love of Christ into it." ³

Ok. By what means do we accomplish this?

The Rev. Dr. Owren – in his sermon on April 30 at St. Luke's talked about prayer. So often our prayers end up being a litany of our requests or petitions, whereas in fact prayer involves a great deal of listening as well.

Prayer is a conversation with God. It's one thing to have a petition, to ask for something, but how are we going to get a reply to that petition if we don't listen? Let's consider it this way – you're in a conversation with a family member or a friend – the subject matter has your attention and you're both enjoying the exchange of ideas. How well are you listening to what the other person is saying before already formulating and answer in your mind? I'm guilty of this. Oh, we're human alright.

In The Adventurous Lectionary, June 2014, Bruce Epperly wrote "we are given the task of claiming and following the power and guidance of the Spirit. We can become agents of reconciliation, bringing earth to heaven and heaven to earth."⁴ And how do we do this? Prayer. Take it to our Lord in prayer and listen. There is more. We step forward, we speak, we act. But everything we do begins with prayer and is constantly rooted in prayer. Listen, listen for the response.

Let's take our humanity point even further.

In his sermon on Jesus' ascension on Thursday 21st May 2009, the Archbishop of Canterbury Dr. Rowan Williams preached at Westminster Abbey during the Ascension Day Sung Eucharist, in which he made substantial reference to the human condition.

The archbishop talked on thoughts from sermons of St. Augustine who felt that the Psalms "were not always fit for polite company." They are full of rude, angry, violent, hateful remarks; the psalms, you might say, are as human as it gets."⁵

According to the archbishop, "Augustine's point was this: apart from the fact that it is no use trying to leave bits of our humanity out of God's sight, God has taken an initiative in making our language his own."⁵

He takes us seriously. He takes us seriously when we're moving towards God and each other in love; and, amazingly, he takes us seriously when we're moving in the opposite direction – when we are spinning downwards into destructive, hateful fantasies. He doesn't let go of us and he doesn't lose sight of us when we seek to lock ourselves up in the dark. Jesus hears all the words we speak – words of pain and protest and rage and violence. He hears them and he takes them and in the presence of the God the Father he says, 'This is the humanity I have brought home.'⁵

In today's Gospel, Jesus prays: "And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one."⁶

In 1 Peter 4:12-14 and 5: 6-11, we are advised to not be surprised at the ordeals taking place and testing us. We are to rejoice in sharing Christ's sufferings. We may be "...reviled for the name of Christ," but we are "blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on (us) you."⁷

With all this background and Corrie ten Boom's experience, let me share a personal event as to the awesome power and work of the Holy Spirit:

Shortly after South Africa changed, and became a free country, one person one vote, Janet and I pursued one of our passions of wildlife viewing and photography. We went on a vacation to the Kruger National Park in South Africa. At the Letaba camp, we stopped for gas. The attendant got busy filling the tank, then I felt him staring at me. I turned and looked, and he said: "excuse me sir, but were you part of the security forces?" To say I was surprised is an understatement. But he'd asked naturally, gentlemanly, and politely, and still surprised, I replied, "Yes. Yes, I was. What made you ask?" That was the realization I had been standing relaxed at the "rest easy" position with my hands behind my back.

He looked at me and then calmly stated: "I was a freedom fighter. You would have referred to me as a terrorist a few years back. Had we met then, we would have been obliged to try kill each other!"

Talk about total surprise. A moment of being completely stunned. That was the humanity he Edward, and I had lived in!

I remember the expectant silence and then stepping forward, extended my hand and we very, very firmly shook hands with mutual comments of "thank goodness we are meeting now!"

And so, the conversation began. What a wonderful discussion we had, with stories and laughter – we eventually had to stop because it was getting late, and it was time to go into camp

for dinner. It felt as though a major, dark, heavy, oppressive force had just simply lifted off my shoulders, releasing my spirit as it did for Edward.

We were simply two guys whose experience had to deal with the crudeness, rough and tumble of humanity. But here we were, enjoying relief and positive human interaction at its finest.

Thank you. Thank you, Lord, for being there, then, and now.

Jesus' ascension was not the end, but simply the beginning. Our task is to be at peace with the world as it is, while seeking to bring the transforming love of Christ into it." ²

As we celebrate the Eucharist together and thank our Lord for what he has done for us, may he continue to guide us, hold our hearts and our hands as we negotiate our role in humanity until when we are reunited with him. As Corrie extended her hand, guided by the Spirit, as I extended my hand, guided by the Spirit, guided by the spirit, who will you extend your hand to? Extend your hand. You will take the hand of Christ. and you will feel the flowing presence of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

Sources:

- 1 Guideposts Classics: Corrie ten Boom on Forgiveness
2. Acts 1: 6-14
3. Anglican Compass: <https://anglicancompass.com/ascension-day-a-collect-reflection/>
4. Bruce Epperly in The Adventurous Lectionary, June 2014
5. Archbishop of Canterbury Dr. Rowan Williams at Westminster Abbey, Ascension Day Sung Eucharist, May 21, 2009
6. John 17:1-11;
7. 1 Peter 4: 12-14, 5: 6-11.