

May 29, 2022
Year C – Ascension (transferred)
Acts 1: 1-11
Psalm 47
Luke 24: 44-53

This past Thursday, the church around the world marked the ascension of Jesus into heaven. Here at St. James', we transferred that celebration to today. And so we read the accounts of Jesus' ascension from the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts. Let me say a little something about what we believe happened in the weeks following Jesus' crucifixion. Three days after Jesus' death on the cross, God raised him from the dead. God did not resuscitate Jesus. Jesus was not brought BACK to life. God brought Jesus *forward*, through death to a new kind of life; eternal life that does not end in death. After Jesus' resurrection, he was present with his disciples. Acts tells us that for 40 days, Jesus appeared to them: eating with them, teaching them, reminding them of all he had said and done. And then, Jesus was taken up into heaven where he lives with God.

We understand only dimly the full meaning of all these events. But one thing this seems to say to us, is that Jesus - having lived a fully human life, now brings that humanity with him into his relationship w God. Jesus takes the fullness of our human experience with him when he ascends to life with God. And, once Jesus is ascended God sends the Holy Spirit to be present with us and in us **with power**. Twice in the readings today, Jesus promises the Holy Spirit, **empowering** Jesus' followers - in other words empowering us - to be **witnesses** in the world; witnesses to the world.

Eric Barreto, Associate Professor of New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary says and I quote, "*I worry that too many of us have made a mistake: a witness is not a spectator. There is a difference between bearing witness and looking on to a scene as an onlooker. There is a difference between the kind of witness that enters the pain of a hurting world and a spectator who gawks from a distance....Witness is a high calling; often it is a burden. For witnesses to the ends of the earth will see stunning instances of God's expansive grace but also crushing visions of death's cruel rule.*"

A witness is a high calling.

A witness is not a spectator.

A witness is not an onlooker from a distance.

A witness enters the pain of a hurting world in the same way God drew near to us with the incarnation of Jesus.

We are called to be witnesses; to enter into the suffering and brokenness of the world, not just to watch it happen and then go about our lives as usual.

This reminder of God's Holy Spirit empowering us to be witnesses, comes to us in a week when 22 people - 19 children, 2 teachers, and a teenage gunman - all died in an elementary school shooting. These words of Jesus to take the witness of our faith to the ends of the earth, come to us 10 days after 10 people were killed at a grocery store in what is being called a hate crime. The US non-profit, Gun Violence Archive, reports that there have been 212 mass shootings so far this year in the United States. They define a mass shooting as an incident in which four or more people are shot or killed not including the attacker.

Now I'm going to stop for a moment and tell you why I am sitting here (on a stool in front of the altar) instead of standing at the lectern where I usually preach. I have decided to do something today that I typically do not do. I want to speak at some length about current events. In fact, I want to speak about gun-violence in our nation. This **kind** of topic - and this **one** in particular - are fraught with emotion and almost immediately lead to discord. In my opinion, it is not advisable - or even fair - to use a sermon to discuss such things, because *a sermon is not actually a discussion*. A sermon is one person who inherently has more power, because they are standing above everyone else, and they are the only one speaking. A sermon therefore is not the best forum for talking about something controversial.

In fact, I suspect the temperature in the room has already gone up without my saying much at all. I would guess that a number of us have already had our heart rate and blood pressure go up. I know I'm feeling incredibly nervous. So I am sitting here, instead of standing there, so it will have a chance of feeling more like a conversation.

So let me reassure you about something. I am not going to tell you how to think or what to do. I am going to go on a journey this morning and simply ask you to walk beside me, to notice some things, to consider some ideas. The Episcopal Church

brings a unique perspective to these kinds of conversations. Unlike some of our sister denominations, the Episcopal Church does not tell people what to think or what to do.

The Episcopal Church tells us TO THINK, and to think theologically, which means to bring the full extent of our faith to inform our thoughts and actions. Thinking theologically means praying as we think. It means reading and studying Scripture. It means listening to the wider wisdom of the Church. It means applying ALL those things to decisions about how we live our lives. And thinking theologically is intended to result in engaging in the world in such a way that we are agents of transformation. The Episcopal Church is intentional about providing resources so that we CAN think theologically, and, so we feel empowered to engage in the issues of life today.

I want to be very clear this morning: I am not telling you HOW to think. I am not asking you to AGREE with me. This Church doesn't expect us to agree. In fact, in the Episcopal Church we believe we can disagree and still worship together. We can disagree and still pray together, still break bread together, still serve the world together. We do not need to agree to do those things. But we do need to think, and to think theologically. We are called to be witnesses, and we can't do that without thinking first. So this morning, I'm inviting you to think about some things with me.

Two days ago the BBC published some statistics comparing the U.S. to other countries.

- Of the top 10 civilian gun-owning countries in the world the US is #1 and has an estimated 120 firearms per 100 individuals.
The next closest country is Yemen with 52 guns per 100 people.
And then Serbia, with 37 guns per 100 people.
- According to the CDC, in 2020, 45,222 people died of gun-related injuries. 54% of those were suicide. 43% were homicides.
The statistic on homicides caused by guns represents a 34% increase since 2019.
- 79% of murders in the US are carried out with guns.
The BBC compares that percentage to other countries.
In Canada 37% of murders are carried out with guns.
In Australia, the number is 13%.
And in the UK, 4% of murders are carried out with guns.

But gun violence in this country is not just about guns. Obviously, this is a complex constellation of issues including:

- a lack of access to mental health services....
- the incredible stress articulated by teens in this country...
- rising levels of rage and despair that get channeled into violence.
- the Southern Poverty Law Center recently published their report that there are 488 anti-government groups in this country and 733 hate groups.
- not to mention that 42 million people in the US live below the poverty line.
- and so much more that contributes to violence in this country

Notice something else with me: when the subject of gun violence comes up, we are almost immediately polarized. We can't agree on the cause, or what to do about it. Imagine if a house were on fire, and the fire department shows up, but stands around arguing about what caused the fire and whose fault it is. I hope that if my house catches on fire, that Skaneateles Fire Department will show up and put it out. I want to suggest to you today, that as a nation, our house is on fire and we are standing around arguing about what caused it and who's to blame. You don't have to agree with me. I'm not asking you to. But I do ask you to think about it and to think about it as a followers of Jesus.

Some people have suggested that gun in this country have risen to the level of idolatry. Idolatry. That means we put guns ahead of faith in God. And I say "we" because as human beings, we are inextricably knit together. This is a "we". So I am inviting you today to think, to pray, to study. And to ask God, "Is there something here I need to know? Something I need to see? Is there something here that I could be doing?"

We're not all called to do the same thing. We're not all going to do things in the same way. But we are ALL sent and empowered by the Holy Spirit to be witnesses; to get involved in the suffering and brokenness of the world around us.

The Episcopal Church provides resources for this specific issue, and other issues, that impact the well-being of all people. The Episcopal Church has an Office of Government Relations in Washington DC. They speak in two directions; to the

government and to the people in the local church. Their mission is to articulate policy priorities to the US government that come directly out of Resolutions from General Convention, and to shape discussion of political issues throughout the church. To that end, they work to educate, equip, and engage Episcopalians through the Episcopal Public Policy Network. You can find the Office of Government Relations and the Episcopal Public Policy Network on the national church's website at www.episcopalchurch.org On this website, you will find resources for reading about gun violence as well as ways to get involved.

There are any number of issues in our nation that are troublesome if not heartbreaking; issues that are divisive, and seemingly impossible to talk about, let alone resolve. **But we are not alone, and we are not helpless.** The story of Jesus' resurrection and ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit is a story that tells us God is with us empowering us to engage; to enter the pain of the world in the same way Jesus did. And what we will find when we do enter in is that God is already there ahead of us.

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