

7 Easter B 2021

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

Psalm 1

John 17:6-19

There once was a little girl
Who was afraid to be alone in her room
After the light was out
And her mother had gone away.

Stay with me,
She would plead.
I'm afraid to be alone.

Every night
Her mother would say,
You're never alone,
God is always here.
God is here in the dark,
And you are never alone.

Finally one night the little girl said,
Yes, but –
I want someone with skin on them.

We want someone with skin on them,
Always –
It's part of our human nature.

We cannot live except in our skins,
And however much we think
Our bodies are here
to carry our minds from place to place,
Or to provide a home
For our feelings,
The truth is,
We experience the world
As creatures with bodies,
And when we are the only bodies around,
We so often feel lost and lonely and afraid.

We know this, all too well,
After a year and more of distance –
Distance from those we love,
Distance from each other in church,

Distance from the bustle and busyness
Of a crowded street, an airport,
A restaurant.
Distance, for those among us who live alone,
From anyone else with skin on them.
Zoom may convey words,
And even expressions,
But it has no skin.
Even as our life of distance is beginning to ease up,
And we can be together in one place,
And even risk the vaccinated hug,
We carry,
In our bodies,
The imprint of those distances,
And the losses of the past year.

We are made of skin, and blood and bone,
And we just want someone with skin on them
So that we'll know we are not alone.

The mystery and miracle of our faith
Is that, for a little while,
We did have someone with skin on them.
God lived in our skin,
Our blood and bone,
Died our death,
And still,
Lives again and forever.
But now, again,
Without skin.
Can we readjust our hopes and expectations
To live in a world
Where God is invisible again?

How do we know, now,
That we are never alone?

Because,
Whether we like it or not,
The earthly Jesus is gone now –
Vanished into heaven
With clouds parted and light streaming down.

Yes, of course he is here with us
In bread and wine –
The bread and wine for which we long,

And to which we will return someday –
Jesus is here with us in the memory of bread and wine,
And in acts of justice and compassion.
But we want someone with skin on them –
That’s the nature of our humanness.

And the moment –
It happened again last Thursday –
when the God with skin on goes away
Is hard for us.
Hard in every way.

Of all the mysteries of our faith,
The Ascension is the hardest to explain.

Yes, the greatest mystery
Is the new life beyond death
Promised in the resurrection of Jesus.

But the Ascension is the mystery
That makes the least sense
In a world where,
Wherever and whatever heaven is,
It isn’t located “up.”

All those pictures of the Ascension,
Some ridiculous,
Some glorious,
Some charming,
Like the one on our service leaflet cover for today –
All of them show the gathered friends
And family of Jesus
Looking up in wonder.



But –
wherever Jesus went,
up doesn't describe it anymore.

So how do you explain the Ascension?

I found myself fumbling,
Years ago at a party,

When someone asked me what on earth it was.
A real-life theology moment.
(And yes,
Like all my stories,
This one is true.)

Try it.
What would you say
To someone who doesn't go to church,
Doesn't know the stories of scripture,
Someone who wants to make sense
Of what we do here,
And, trusting you as a reasonable person,
would not believe you
If you said you believed
That last Thursday
Jesus rose up from the ground
And into the clouds,
Where the throne of God is.

The best I could do
Was to tell the story,
Say it was almost impossible
To wrap our minds around it,
And then talk about this little season,
The brief moment of Ascensiontide,
As a time of waiting.

A time of waiting,
As we let go the loss
Of the God with skin on,
And try to remember the promise:
God is with us always.

A time of waiting
For the promise to unfold
In some new mystery.

If God is with us always,
God will offer the divine self again,
In another new and glorious way.

If we are faithful to the story,
This is the time before the promise,
And we don't really know
What the promise looks like now,

In these times.
We don't know what God has in mind.
We have to wait.

As if we didn't know already about waiting,
One of the basic facts of life,
We have learned more than enough about it
In the year and more
We have passed through.

A year of waiting for answers.
A year of waiting for the vaccine,
A year of waiting to get the vaccine,
A year of waiting to take our masks off.

And for some of us,
Thought the waiting has been painful,
We have managed.
But what about our neighbors,
Our friends,
And those we will never meet,
Who have waited to see
If there would be another reprieve,
To keep them in their homes,
To help them put food on the table another week?

And what about those who waited
To see their loved ones return from the hospital,
Those who waited to bury their dead?

What about those who have been waiting for justice?
What about all of us
As we waited in the days after the election?

Waiting is what we always do –
Now more than ever.

But how many of us –
Really –
How many of us are waiting,
Like the friends of Jesus,
Eagerly and in constant prayer
For the descent of the dove
At the great feast of Pentecost?

Before every great event in our faith community,

We wait.
We wait in Advent,
And in Lent.
And now.
Even in the midst of the cataclysm
That has become our lives,
The story of the liturgical year is real.

We forget about this waiting,
This little time
Between the Ascension
And the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost.

But it is real,
And here we are,
Bewildered by the glory upon glory of the good news,
And waiting for the promised comfort.
Even in this year,
As last year,
This is real.
We are waiting for the Holy Spirit.

Waiting creatively is a challenge.
This past year,
Some of us have done it well,
And even thrived.
Some of us are almost broken.

For all of us, the waiting is real,
And we cannot get away from it.

So what do we do?

This time between times
Might give us a chance to consider –
What if the Holy Spirit we say we're waiting for
Is really real?
As real a God
As the God with skin on?

What if that God
Won't leave us alone
Whether we like it or not?

What if that God
Is getting ready to get inside our own skins

And change us from within?

Whatever was lonely in this year of distance,
Whatever was broken in this time of loss,
The Holy Spirit can find a way in,
To transform, enliven,
Heal and make whole.
This will happen;
It is the one thing we can trust,
Absolutely.
Restrictions may be eased and then imposed again,
Numbers may go up and down,
Our politics may be nonsensical
And racial justice still beyond the horizon,
But the promise of the Holy Spirit
Is trustworthy and true.

Now is for waiting,
And trusting,
And taking comfort
In the sure and certain knowledge
That God will come among us
As wind and fire
Or as the gentlest of breezes
And the faintest of hints.

In whatever form the Holy Spirit comes,
We will have everything we need
To do
What we are called to do
In the name of God.

For there is much to do.
Almost everything,
It sometimes seems.
Proclaiming and living and sharing
Abundance
In a world that fears scarcity.
Freedom in a world
Mired in injustice.
Love
In a world
Crying out for the love
That accepts and welcomes everyone.

Are we equal to the task?

Once God gets inside our skins,
All things are possible.

Wait.

God will guide us and protect us

And tend us

Through the week to come.

God has promised we will never be alone.

God is with us, now and beyond the end.