

EASTER 7B (Sunday after Ascension)

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

Psalm 1

1 John 5:9-13

John 17: 6-19

This is the final Sunday of the Easter Season. In church time, Jesus ascended into heaven on Thursday and we are alone, as the disciples were, waiting to see what happens next. So, in the Collect (the prayer for today in your insert), we pray for the coming of the Holy Spirit to fulfill Jesus' last promise. The Ascension is the completion of Jesus' earthly journey. A few weeks ago, we read from the Presbyterian Children's Catechism. Here's what they say about the ascension:

What does it mean that Jesus ascended into heaven? After his work on earth was done, he returned to heaven to prepare a place for us and to rule with God in love. He will come again in glory, and remains with us now through the gift of the Holy Spirit.ⁱ

Christ ascended into heaven but is still acting for us and with us. He is planning for us, preparing for us, and praying for us NOW. Although Christ is gone from the earth, we have not been forgotten or abandoned. Christ is already working on our behalf from heaven. Next week, we will celebrate the gift of Christ's Spirit which came and

stayed with us, here and even now. We have great hope for eternity, but always, we have God and the promise of an abundant life with Christ that began at our baptism. **Our lives in Christ are not just a future hope, they are a present reality.** It is a great mystery, a reality that we cannot see, yet it is the ultimate truth that Christ is with us in a profound ways when we gather here, or wherever two or three gather in his name. The ascended, glorified Christ is as interested and involved in our well-being now as the human Jesus was in the lives of his own family and friends, the disciples and the apostles.

We've been hearing the words of John from the Letter of First John about living as Jesus' people in the world, written to people in the first years after Jesus ascended to heaven. John wanted to remind people that they were already living eternal life and that they could be witnesses to that life. Around them, they could see other living witnesses to eternal life.

Christian doctrine is clear. Our eternal life has already begun. The First Letter of John continues today with talk about God witnessing TO US about eternal life. *According to 1 John, therefore, those who are experiencing eternal life are those who are inspired by*

*God's Spirit to speak truth and to live out love that is consistent with God's revelation through God's Son, Jesus Christ.*ⁱⁱ

This may be different than you have thought about eternal life before. My regular commentator Mr. Barclay puts it this way – “the essence of the Christian life is *eternal life*.”ⁱⁱⁱ He explains that the word in Greek is **aiónios**. He says: “It means far more than simply *lasting for ever*. A life which lasted for ever might well be a curse and not a blessing, an intolerable burden and not a shining gift. There is only one person to whom **aiónios** may be properly applied and that is God. In the real sense of the term it is God alone who possesses and inhabits eternity. *Eternal life* is, therefore, nothing other than *the life of God himself*. What we are promised is that here and now there can be given us a share in the very life of God. He goes on to explain that in God there is peace, therefore eternal life means serenity. In God there is power and, therefore, eternal life means the defeat of frustration and victory over circumstance. In God there is holiness and therefore eternal life means the defeat of sin. In God there is life and therefore eternal life means the defeat of death. This life is available to us through Jesus.

If you remember back in April when we began talking about this Letter of John, you may recall that the audience was a community divided by arguments. The arguments were about whether Jesus was really human or ALL GOD. First John is very clear, Jesus was divine AND human. God came to us, in the fragile, human flesh of Jesus to live and die among—so that he could make a way and so that he could be a way for us to be reunited in the joy that was present at our creation. Jesus accomplished his earthly mission and today we celebrate the conclusion of his sojourn with us. After Jesus did the will of the Father, he returned triumphant to live and reign and work toward our inclusion in the eternal, divine dance of love.

This letter was written to believers, it was not intended to convert people to faith in Jesus Christ. It was written to encourage them to live the “eternal new life” they had been given in their baptism. Do you know the difference between life and death?

[How do you know you are alive?]

[How would you know if you were dead?]

[Do you know what it means to be “as good as dead” or “might as well be dead” or “wish I was dead” or “deadened”????] Eternal life as First John is describing it is about living now so that we feel fully

alive and part of the world we live in. Eternal life is about living in love and relationship with God and the other children of God in a way that increases love and connections among us. Eternal life is about letting God use whatever we are, and whatever we have, to connect us TO LIFE.

Let me tell you a bit about my childhood. My parents were “as good as dead” for a long time after my only brother drowned when I was about 5. My elderly neighbors made a place for me to visit, cared about me and connected me with loving life when my parents could not. Mr. and Mrs. Fritz gave me Nabisco cookies and their grandson’s cast-off books. Mr. and Mrs. Owensby let me sit with their parakeet for hours while they sat quietly in the house. Mrs. Paetzel let me play roll after roll of music in her player piano and took me with her to bingo. Pastor Kasper, who must have been still young enough to pastor a church, let me sit in the air-conditioned Lutheran Church for hours. These people gave me life until my parents could bring themselves back from grief and death. None of those people went to “my” church. As far as I can tell, my parents church abandoned them when they quit going. God’s kingdom is broad and deep, and we are its representatives wherever we are and whatever we do.

There have been times in life when I was “as good as dead”. Those of you who have known severe depression will understand my meaning. Yet, God revived me and brought me back to LIFE. It was almost always in and through a Christian community.

As we have studied this letter of John, we have heard how you can see eternal life in yourself and among your church brothers and sisters. *How does the community know that it has eternal life...1*

John suggests the following:

- a) by its love for one another (3:14);*
- b) by laying down life for one another (3:16);*
- c) by sharing the world's goods with those who are in need (3:17);*
- d) in its obedience to Jesus' commandment, which is to believe in his name and love one another (3:23; 5:3-5).*

Thus, the most persuasive evidence for eternal life is seen in the extent to which the community walks in the manner that Jesus walked (2:5b-6) and demonstrates its love for one another (4:11-12; 20-21).^{iv}

Just as a reminder about walking in the way that Jesus walks, I'll return to the Children's catechism for a moment:

What did Jesus do during his life on earth? He called disciples to follow him. He fed the hungry, healed the sick, blessed children, befriended outcasts, required people to repent, and forgave their sins. He taught people not to fear, but to trust always in God.

He preached the good news of God's love and gave everyone hope for new life.^v

Jesus' way of life requires a lifelong commitment. To live as Jesus lived, to live faithfully in Jesus' name, takes staying connected to the full power of God's light and love given to us at baptism. Let me give a word of warning here. It is very easy, it is much more comfortable, to talk about love as the heart of what we believe, instead of trying to live as Jesus lived. To say, God is love, and to say that wherever love is, God is fits in with what we can say to our neighbors without feeling strange. However, what First John is teaching us has two sides. **First**, you must love God with faith in Jesus Christ who lived and died and rose again to make a way for us to join in God's eternal life. Only through the power of that faith, can you do the **Second** part. Only through faith can you live out love as Jesus did, loving your neighbor in the way that becomes a way of life, a daily journey, a path that will take you home. You must become a disciple, live a life of love, and encourage and be a beacon of new life in Christ.

The modern translation of the Bible puts the message clearly:
⁴⁻⁵ Every God-begotten person conquers the world's ways. The

conquering power that brings the world to its knees is our faith. The person who wins out over the world's ways is simply the one who believes Jesus is the Son of God. (The Message)

At his Ascension, Jesus returned to his eternal life with the imprint of humanity still on him—yet glorified. What we profess to believe as truth, is that we have been joined with Jesus, in the profound sacramental act of baptism. We have been delivered from the weight of what is not God's—sin, evil and death. We have been given the power to live in and with God, and God in and with us. We are already living in the Kingdom of God, full of goodness, justice, holiness and health. In the fullness of time, we will return to God, resurrected in the body, yet glorified. Jesus has gone before us, but we will come after. We will be with him in the new heaven and earth, which is coming even now. This is the final Alleluia of the Easter Season. Rejoice!! And in joy that Jesus' work was completed for us - let the people say! AMEN!! And ALLELUIA!!

ⁱ Question 29, *Belonging to God: A First Catechism* (PCUSA)

ⁱⁱ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3670

ⁱⁱⁱ William Barclay, *The Letters of John and Jude*, rev. ed., p. 112

^{iv} http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1305

^v Question 26, *op.cit.*