

Sermon: *What Does Mother's Day & Ascension Day have in common?*  
The Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels, 5.12.24

Happy Mother's Day! Happy day to all of you who have mothers, to you who are mothers, and to you who have been like a mother to someone.

Happy Ascension Day too! For the past sixteen years, I've never preached on a Sunday where Mother's Day and Ascension Day land on the same day. This has caused me to ponder all week what the two days have in common. First, let's talk about Ascension Day.

Jesus ascended into heaven ten days before the Day of Pentecost. Technically, we should have celebrated Ascension Day this past Thursday – putting it ten days before Pentecost Sunday. But, for churches like ours; like most; who do not have a Thursday ascension service, we get to move the celebration day to Sunday (and then hope that no one notices that it will be seven, not ten days, until Pentecost). I know this sounds really churchy, because it is, but we do have rules and order to all of this.

If you look at the Nicene Creed, in the middle, we have the ascension listed. Here's the line:

*On the third day he rose again in accordance with the scriptures, he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father; he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his Kingdom will have no end. Amen and Alleluia.*

Okay, I added that part, but it fits – amen and alleluia. When the creed was written, around the year 325, the belief in the ascension was so strong it made it in. In fact, if you look at the Gospel lesson for today, you'll see that they took a lot of that language and placed it in the creed. That is how foundational and fundamentally important today – Ascension Day – is to the life and theology of the Church. Yet we often miss it or gloss over it.

I have read a good amount about the theology of the ascension and have read many sermons about it. I need to disagree with the approach many preachers take on this day. They treat today as a great commissioning day – Jesus ascended and said, “Go and spread the good news,” – so we should do that. While I agree that we should go and spread the good news, I disagree with that homiletical approach on Ascension Day; today is not a commissioning day. Today is a day to remember the miracle of the ascension and to ponder its meaning in our lives. Today is for reflection and, as the disciples did, for staring into the cloud for some sort of meaning. It is about listening to the voice of angels that tell us to ponder Jesus' return. The Great Commissioning will come later, after Pentecost, but right now, let's ponder the meaning of the Ascension in our lives.

Ascension is vitally important to the life of the Church because there is no tomb of Jesus that we visit. No one claims to have a piece of Jesus' body. Period. Do you know where the body of St. Peter and St. Paul is located? They are believed to be under the Vatican somewhere. It used to be that a church was named for a particular saint because they had a relic of the saint (a hand, a toe, leg bone [I know, it's a little creepy]). There is a St. Luke's church that claims to have some of Luke's body. As it turned out, it was a toenail held within the altar. But, it is really really important to that church to have it.

The most popular church name in the Episcopal Church is “Christ”. Yet no one claims to have any relic of Jesus’s body. Why? Because he ascended. There is no tomb to visit, nothing, because he ascended into heaven. Relics of the saints became so important to the early Church that for a short while the Roman authorities used to take the bodies of the martyrs and burn them and then grind the bones down to dust and place the dust in a swiftly moving river – all to avoid them from being used as relics. Imagine what would have happened if we had Jesus’ body. There would have been two distinct classes of church – those with a relic and those inferior churches who do not. (Similar to how Rome asserted itself above other cities/churches because of having the bodies of saints Peter and Paul) Thankfully, for many reasons, Jesus ascended into heaven.

Let’s take a look at the Gospel lesson. Luke, the writer, wrote it in Greek. If you read it closely, in English, you’ll see that it says Jesus “withdrew” from them. That’s an easy word to translate into English. It’s an economic word that we could use like this: the buyer and seller could not agree on a price, so the buyer withdrew the offer. She went to the bank and withdrew some money. Here one day, gone the next. Withdrew. Technically, today should be Happy Withdrawing Day. But we say ascend. In the second account, written by Luke, the Acts of the Apostles, Luke describes Jesus being overshadowed by a cloud and disappearing from their sight. The idea is that clouds are in the sky so therefore Jesus went up and not necessarily withdrew. But, being from Washington State, I’d like to think of this as a fog bank and not a Florida thunderhead cloud. Luke didn’t describe which one. Nevertheless, Jesus withdrew from their sight. And the disciples were filled with joy and were in the Temple everyday praising God.

This is where I have a question. Why were the disciples filled with joy and not sadness or grief? It’s not that the Gospels do not tell of emotion; they do; and the emotion listed here is joy. Were they tired of seeing the resurrected Jesus? Was he so different – than before the resurrection – that forty days of having him pop in and out made them jumpy or tired and that is why they were excited that he had finally ascended/withdrew? I don’t think so. The purpose of this section, and maybe Luke’s writing in its entirety, is to focus our attention on this word: fulfilled. Luke began his Gospel, in the first sentence, with giving an account of what was “fulfilled among us.” Luke mentions four times in the Acts of the Apostles that this is what has been fulfilled for us. His purpose in writing, and his purpose of Jesus and the disciples-turned-apostles is that this is the plan that God had fulfilled. Today it has been fulfilled in your hearing.

Mother’s Day. What is the link? I’d say it is in the word fulfilled. Yes, many (not all) mothers are fulfilled by being mothers but I’d like to go deeper than that. Fulfilled in Luke’s time meant that the next generation “got it”; they did it, they heard the words (they who never saw Jesus, like Luke himself) and came to believe that he is the Son of God and has opened to us, to Jewish and Gentile people, the gateway to eternal/abundant life. It has been fulfilled in your hearing – you being the next generation. They say a mother’s work is never done. While that is true, there are things that your mother taught you that you are fulfilling today. And, by hearing your mother, by doing them, you are fulfilling her call to be a mother.

Let me take a moment to talk about those who have mothers that didn’t feel particularly called to be a mother or those who had moms who struggled at it, or couldn’t do it at all. There is a way to fulfill motherhood, to respect one’s mother and one’s father, as outlined in the Ten

Commandments, even for those parents who struggled. I have a friend whose mother was a chain smoker. He will never, ever smoke because his mom did. He credits that to giving him a longer life than her – because he learned from her bad example. In a way, he is fulfilling what his mother started by abstaining. A friend in college had a mother who struggled with her addiction to alcohol. He is a family therapist. He credits his mother's struggles with his ability to help others. Fulfilled.

This Ascension Sunday, this week, I invite you to ponder how you can fulfill what your mom started within you. What can you do to fulfill her love in you. Or, what can you do differently in your life that she could not do in hers?

For those of you who had decent mothers and those who had outstanding models of love and care and respect at home, fulfilling for us is to live into how we were taught. When I was young, my mom and a group of friends started a public library in our town. She believed/believes strongly in having books and information available to the public. When I was in Junior High, she started St. Anthony's Bookshelf, a Christian bookstore at our Episcopal church. The only Christian bookstore in town was Roman Catholic and mom wanted to make sure people had access to a wide range of theology and practice. When I was in college, mom and dad purchased The Episcopal Bookstore in Seattle. They gave up their careers and started a second career, a second act if you will. Mom had modeled St. Anthony's Bookshelf based on that store and here they were, ten years later, owning it. They had \$162,000 in their first year. When they sold it – dad was getting sick so it was time – they had over \$980,000 in sales. It was quite a second act for them. Mom's main focus, however, was not sales but getting books into the hands of those who wanted them and those who were searching for a deeper relationship with God.

Two weeks ago, in our Men's Discussion Group, I quoted a section of Ecclesiastes. I had a participant who did not have a Bible. I went into my office where mom had given a bunch of irregular or damaged Bibles to give away. I took one, marked Ecclesiastes, and gave it to him. I then fulfilled what my mother taught me.

I invite you to ponder how you can fulfill what your mom started within you. What can you do to fulfill her love in you. Or, what can you do differently in your life that she could not do in hers? Was she kind and open to others? Did she help a stranger from time to time? Was she always available for a hug or a shoulder to cry on? Did she have a commitment and love of Christ and served his Church? Was her faith known to God alone yet hoped for you to have an outward faith?

This day we remember, we ponder, Jesus' ascension, his withdrawing from public view, to begin his life invisibly in our lives and through our hearts. May we fulfill his ascension by pondering and remembering what our mothers have done for us and to fulfill their love, through Christ, with others.

Happy Mother's Day. Happy Ascension Sunday.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.