

“Deus Ascendit.”

Acts 1:1-11

(Ascension Day)

Methodist Bishop William H. Willimon (a favorite author of both Rev. Duerwaechter and myself) tells about being in New Haven Connecticut as a student at Yale in 1970 during the famous Black Panther Trial.

The whole conflict involving the Black Panther organization caused a time of great turmoil in our country around that time.

During the week when that crisis in New Haven reached its peak, Willimon attended a choral mass at a nearby Catholic Parish. A boy's choir was singing, “*Deus Ascendit, God Has Gone Up.*”

Willimon mused, “Just as I thought. God has gone up. And isn't that typical? Gone up, up away from New Haven and the angry shouts of the mob and the gunfire of the cops and the revolutionaries.”

In other words, Willimon was saying to himself, “God has abandoned us.”

As he continued to listen, however, the idea struck him that the choir did not sing “*Deus Abscondit* -- God has abandoned us.” The boys were shouting “*Deus Ascendit. God has gone up.*”

God has begun in heaven what has yet to be accomplished on earth. Christ is gone, not to forsake us, but to continue to redeem us. He has gone to take charge, to rule, to put all things under His feet. *Deus Ascendit.* God has gone up.

The setting is on the Mount of Olives. Jesus has broken bread with His disciples. He has told them that soon they will be baptized with the Holy Spirit, and when the Holy Spirit has come upon them, they will be given power to be His witnesses not only in Jerusalem, not only throughout Judea, not only in Samaria, but to the very ends of the earth.

When He had spoken these words, He was lifted up before them into the heavens until a cloud hid Him from their sight. As the disciples stood there gawking at this...staring into the sky, two men dressed in white robes stood beside them and said: “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

It's quite a scene! One may conjure up images from that final scene in the movie *The Greatest Story Ever Told* when the Risen Christ is giving final instructions to His disciples just before He Ascends back into heaven. Remember that scene? Hollywood does it well! The background music is that of a choir singing the Hallelujah Chorus from Handel's *Messiah*.

Then as Jesus stretches out His arms and goes sailing up through the clouds, He utters those famous words from Matthew 28: "*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.....and surely I am with you always, even until the end of the age.*"

The Ascension is a difficult thing to preach on. Mainly because there is always someone who wants to ask me: "Did Jesus really go flying up out of here like that?" They want evidence. Sometimes they want to refute the biblical story altogether.

My answer is always this: "I don't know. I wasn't there." I'm not here today to defend the supernatural. I can't prove something to you that I can't completely grasp, myself. Forget about the mechanics of it. To get all wrapped up in the process of the Ascension is to miss the point entirely!

What took place at the Ascension is that Jesus went back into heaven to assume His rightful place as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. What also took place is that the Church of Jesus Christ (that includes us) was on the verge of being born. The Ascension has an element of mystery to it.

The very essence of what it means to have faith is that one be content to live with mystery. It means that one learns to believe in and trust in something that they cannot fully understand, or even prove empirically. The Ascension is one of those mysteries.

It is said that the wife of Albert Einstein was once asked if she understood her husband's theory of relativity. She replied, "No, but I know my husband and I know he can be trusted."

The disciples knew that Christ can be trusted. They believed that Christ is in charge of the universe and that made all of the difference in the world to them.

There was a young woman who went away to college in the fall leaving her plants and her goldfish in the care of her mother, who had a tendency to be forgetful. This girl's mother was also not very efficient at doing a lot of things.

The plants that the daughter left behind in the care of her mother died at the end of the month. The mother called her daughter to break the bad news to her.

When the daughter called home a week later, her mother confessed that

the goldfish had died too.

There was a long pause, then in a fearful voice the girl asked, “How’s Dad?”

I’m glad that that mother is not in charge of the universe. I am glad that I am not in charge of the universe, or that any of you (no offense) are not in charge of the universe. I am glad that the Democrats and Republicans are not in charge of the universe!

I am glad that *Deus Ascendit!* God has gone up. Christ is in charge!

There is something else that bears mentioning. The disciples were of one accord. That is miraculous in and of itself! Why is that? How is it that they were united?

Well, I suppose that it had something to do with Jesus. Remember what I said last week about how foolish it is to eat the parsley and throw away the steak? That’s something that the disciples understood. They were united by their common commitment to Jesus Christ. They had matured to a point where they didn’t argue anymore about who was to be the greatest or the least; rather, they unified around Christ.

About a year or so ago, a member of St. Peter’s shared a story with me about one of those formal kinds of churches where everyone is so rigid and uncompromising. (I grew up in a church like that.) Everyone dressed formally and no one dared to even smile. It was “let’s-all-be-serious-for Jesus.” They probably baptized people in vinegar instead of water!

Anyway, on one particular Sunday there was a young man who came into the sanctuary. He was dressed in blue jeans and a t-shirt, and he wore no shoes. He wasn’t homeless, but he was of the “hippy” variety. Because the church was packed, he couldn’t find a place to sit in the pews (This MUST have been a long time ago!), so he sat down cross-legged on the carpeted floor right in front of the first pew.

The tension in the air was so thick as many members of the congregation -- and quite possibly even the pastor -- sat in judgment of this young man because of his appearance. The glares of silent contempt hit the back of his neck like hot spotlights onto a stage.

In the midst of that tension, an elderly man -- one of the patriarchs of the church -- got up out of his pew and began walking up the aisle towards that young man. People watched in anticipation, because they were certain that their elderly patriarch was going to put his foot down and ask the young man to leave.

When the older man got to where the young man was seated on the floor, he slowly lowered himself to the floor and sat WITH that young man.

Then the two of them sat together and worshipped together.

That is what the church SHOULD be. Are we linked by the common denominator of faith in Jesus Christ, or are we not?

Because Christ has Ascended to His rightful place as King of Kings and Lord of Lords, we need to know that we are called to be the King's people.

Deus Ascendit! God has gone up! May WE climb up a level accordingly.

Amen.