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7 Easter A: Acts 1

St. Anne's Episcopal Parish, Annapolis, MD

June 5, 2011

*Church Friends*

This past Thursday was an important Holy day in the Church. It's probably right up there with Ash Wednesday for holidays the greeting card industry hasn't caught up with. Last Thursday was the fortieth day of Easter, Ascension Day, the day when, according to the biblical witness, Jesus ascended into heaven. Our first lesson this morning tells us about that event. Jesus was gathered with his disciples, he spoke with them, and then he was lifted out of their sight. And there they were, those disciples, looking up at the clouds, when two angels come and say to them, "What are you standing around here for?" And off the disciples go to Jerusalem, to pray and to see what would happen next.

There's an interesting detail in the way the book of Acts tells the story – not just that Jesus was lifted up from their sight (we will come back to that later), but something else. At the end of the event, a whole group of people is named. This amazing thing has happened, and the writer takes time for roll call. You know – Matthew was there, and James and John, Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Philip and Thomas, and more – they were all there.

In part, I think that's so that anyone reading about this event would know who the witnesses were, who saw it, who remembered that day. But there's more. I think all those names are recorded because community is so important in the Church. God-blessed community *is* the Church. And when Jesus ascends into heaven, his time and ministry on earth fulfilled, Jesus leaves the disciples behind, but he doesn't leave them alone. Never, ever, alone.

Community is so important, one of God's greatest gifts.

Robert Putnam is Malkin professor of public policy at Harvard. He is co-author of a recent book, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. In this study, Putnam and co-author David Campbell report some interesting things. As you might suspect, Americans, they found, are deeply divided and polarized along religious lines. But there are also some interesting ways in which religious people in America reach across religious lines, beyond religious communities. Putnam and Campbell found that in 20 different ways they measured behaviors that go with being a good neighbor or a good citizen, religious people are substantially better neighbors and better citizens than non-religious people. They – we -- are more likely to volunteer, within church and outside of church in ways that benefit the larger community. We are more likely to give to charities, not just by putting money in the offering plate, but by giving outside the church and to so-called secular causes. We are more likely to work on community projects, two or three times more likely than a non-religious person. We are much more likely to give blood, let other people cut in front of us in line, give money to someone in need. Some aspects of theology differ between religious communities, so what accounts for this similarity?

Putnam said that what seems to really make the difference in terms of religious people being better citizens, more committed to the common good, and better neighbors is, he says, “entirely due to having close friendships in your religious congregation, whatever that congregation is. . . what we call in shorthand, church friends. Church friends are really important. The more church friends you have, the nicer you are. . . it’s not just that the church friends are friends, church friends,” Putnam says, “are supercharged friends. They make a bigger impact on your reach into the community, your generosity, your good neighborliness.”<sup>i</sup>

I’ve seen it and I bet many of you have too. These “supercharged friends” who go above and beyond, who give to people they don’t know, who show up at funerals, even if they didn’t really know the person, who knit baptismal blankets, not because they know the baby, but because it’s what we do for people at church, who bring casseroles and comfort, who send cards, who ask, “what can I do?” and mean it, who pray. And who do these things, not because the recipients of this love of neighbor sit next to us in the pews or agree with us about everything, but because we, in these pews, have friends who support and encourage us beyond these pews too.

Jesus left his disciples behind, but not alone.

Next week, on the Feast Day of Pentecost, we will hear about another significant way Jesus did not leave us alone, by giving us the gift of the Holy Spirit. But this week, let's give thanks for the gift of Jesus leaving us never alone, but in the care of one another. In our gospel lesson, we even overhear Jesus pray for all of his followers, throughout all time, that we may be one as Jesus and God are one. He prays for his followers as a group – that we may actually be community with God and with one another. It's that important. It's that big of a blessing. Jesus says it's a way that we can have what he and God the father have – unity, communion.

Jesus leaves his disciples behind, but never leaves us alone.

Even in leaving his disciples behind, by ascending into heaven, he was not just going away, not escaping or abandoning the earthly realm for the heavenly. The story of the Ascension, with its imagery of Christ ascending bodily into heaven, was a way for the earliest followers of Jesus Christ, the earliest Church, to express their faith in a couple of things about Jesus and about us. The Church teaches that in the Incarnation, the divine became present in humanity. Jesus was Emmanuel, God with us. But could humanity actually come into the presence of the divine? Could humanity, with all our vulnerability and weakness, our fragility, actually survive in the presence of the Holy? To say Jesus was taken bodily into heaven is to say that humanity, flesh and blood humanness, can come into the presence of God. Jesus, who still bore the scars of the crucifixion, was taken into the very presence of God. He didn't have to slough off his humanity in order to be in the presence of the divine. The path that the Incarnate Christ leads us in, through baptism, life, death, resurrection, will also lead into heaven, into the very presence of God.

So, we talk about Jesus, ascended into heaven, and seated at the right hand of God in glory. To talk like this is to use ancient language to describe the power Christ has. To describe someone at the right hand of a ruler is to say that the ruler's power extends to that person. We still talk about being someone's "right hand man." To say that Christ is *seated* at the right hand of God is to add another layer of magnitude to the picture. In the ancient world, no one sits in the presence of a king. Still less would one sit in the presence of a god. And here, Jesus is seated at the right hand of the one

God. So here's the picture: Jesus – human and divine, scarred, embodied, and victorious over death – Jesus – God made flesh, who knew all human pain, as well as the capacity to be wonderfully, fully, gloriously human with all our capacity for bearing the image of God – is granted all the power and glory of God.

All of this language, though perhaps strange to us, gave a way for Christ's followers to express this truth, heard today in our Eucharistic prayer: that Jesus ascended “to prepare a place for us; that where he is, there we might also be, and reign with him in glory.” Seated in glory, far above all power we can fathom, sits Jesus Christ, who knew brokenness and pain, who cared for the broken-hearted and the outcast, who loved the lonely and those called unlovable, who died rather than bow to earthly power, who calls us brothers and sisters, who prepares a place for us, left his disciples behind, but never ever alone. Ever. Ever.

We can experience that love and power now. We can draw close to those who have been given to us in this community. We can reach out in love beyond this community. Be proud of your church friends. Encourage them. Love them. Make some. Make some new ones. You can never have too many. It's one of the best gifts we're given – directly by Jesus – our Ascension Day present from Jesus. And it's a gift we can open today.

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<sup>i</sup> Robert Putnam, on “The Kojo Namdi Show,” aired Wednesday, Dec 22, 2010, 1:06 pm, <http://thekojonamdishow.org/shows/2010-12-22/how-religion-divides-unites>, accessed 6/2/2011.