

I found it! Even before I died. I always wondered if I've ever get to see it. And it happened on my recent trip: I found heaven. Heaven wasn't to be seen in the sky or in the woods or in the waters or anyplace I expected. Heaven didn't look anything like what I thought heaven to be. In fact, I walked right by it before I realized what I had done. So I retraced a few steps, grabbed my husband's arm pulling him back with me and pointed my camera. It was across the busy street, right there all the time. You see, most of the towns and cities in Ireland have buildings attached to each other, just a whole block of buildings connected one to the other. Each entrance has big letters over their colored front doors or windows to distinguish one place from another. There are no neon signs and not many street signs. But each front of a building had a name on it. You'd see Murphy's Pub or Dunne Stores or Museum or Paddy's Gifts spelled out in big letters right there so you could find your way in. We walked a lot in the cities and it was almost on the last day of my vacation when I found heaven. It was above the door all the time. Right there on the front of the building. Heaven. Right in the middle of everyday life. The sign above the door said didn't say Murphy's Pub or Dunne Stores, it said "Heaven."

I looked carefully into the store windows. I even took a photo of the building. The store was closed up and dark. I don't think Jesus was in 'heaven' that day. So where, I thought to myself, is Jesus these days? Where did Jesus go?

Pastor Catherine Taylor says that when the Sunday closest to Ascension Day rolls around, it always poses a dilemma: Skip the Sunday readings and read the story of Jesus rising into heaven? Or give the Ascension a miss? She says that last year in her congregation, Jesus didn't even ascend to heaven, probably because she liked the lessons for the 7th Sunday of Easter better and because, well, the Ascension is a tricky subject. We here, at Christ Church, have heard the lessons relating to the Ascension of Jesus instead of the 7th Sunday of Easter.

Some scholars would say that the Ascension never happened. It was a story, they say, to support the Hebrew scriptures style of prophets ascending into the clouds and to help people back then understand but that the ascension story today might be outdated, pre-scientific fiction. Others, such as Pastor Catherine, would say that history is important but that it's not the preacher's job to take the bible's mysterious stories and make sense of them, that we shouldn't get rid of the strangeness or the wildness or the unpredictability. Catherine says that if a story is mysterious, then the church needs to practice being mystified. Perhaps we can even meet Christ in a new way in divine mystery.

So I'm not going to spend any time today wondering about the 'how' of the Ascension, whether Jesus rose into the sky like a helium balloon or not. I'm not interested either in the 'why' of the Ascension. Today, I'd like to look at a different gift in this story; and to receive the gift, we have to think about it in a new way.

(Catherine Taylor, adapted and my own added:) [We don't celebrate the Ascension because it's forty-something days after Easter and that's what the church is supposed to do. We don't celebrate the Ascension because the creed says Jesus rose into heaven to sit on the right hand of God. We celebrate the Ascension because we're no different from the early church who gathered around this story from the beginning to hear what they needed: the news that they were going to receive power. And perhaps even more importantly, we celebrate this day to be reminded that we have no power of our own and never have.

There the disciples were, a fragile little community, anxious and bewildered, watching their Lord leave them, but they aren't distraught and sad. When it's all over, they're worshipping with joy. They had an advantage over us. They knew they had no power of their own. Any power they would ever know would be given to them by the Spirit, and they aren't even told when or how. Someone in the group does ask the practical question—someone in a group always does. He or she asks Jesus: "Are you going to restore the kingdom to

Israel now?" It's not a faith question; it's more a political question: 'so have we won now?' It's the wrong question to be asking, but it's always all right with Jesus to ask the wrong question. "God knows the answer, but we don't get to," Jesus says. "Stop worrying about having things the way you want them and wait for something else, a power that is coming."

We live in an era and in a nation which is deluded by the notion that everything is up to us.] To join a church, to be part of a church, is to stand up and to interrupt that idea. Whenever people like us gather in church, remembering that we are baptized, that we share Christ in the bread and the wine, we are publicly proclaiming that we rely on a power beyond ourselves, that we believe in God whose love and strength sustains us in all things. *We rely on a power beyond ourselves, we believe in God whose love and strength sustains us in all things.* We proclaim that we have received a gift beyond description and that with God's help, all is possible. Even things like resurrections and ascensions. In Christ, with Christ, and through Christ, all of God's promises are a 'yes'!

So today, we gather in prayer and in action and hopefully in joy, recalling Christ's birth, death, resurrection and now honoring his ascension. Soon, on the feast of Pentecost, we will reflect on the gift of the Holy Spirit. But where Jesus is these days is still the question of the day.

The two men in white garments who were present at Jesus' ascension hint at the answer. 'Why do you stand there looking at the sky?' You have a task to do. You have a gift to carry into the world. From now on, while Christ is no longer humanly present on this earth, YOU are the body of Christ; by your actions you must proclaim the good news; you must drive out the demons that hold people in their clutches; you must embrace all people, *all people*, with the way of the love of God. You yourselves now are the answer to the question, just where did Jesus go? God gave the world you, because, sustained with God's love and God's strength, YOU are the answer, right here on a busy street, in the middle of everyday life. *Amen.*