

Above All Heavens to Fill All Things

*A sermon by the Rev. Daniel Simons
at St. Paul's on the Green, Norwalk, CT*

SUNDAY AFTER THE ASCENSION: MAY 21, 2023

ACTS 1:6-14 | PSALM 93 | EPHESIANS 1:15-23 | LUKE 24:44-53

*In the name of the Risen One,
who is above all heavens and fills all things. Amen.*

In Lewis Carroll's book *Alice in Wonderland*, there's a scene where Alice is talking with the White Queen. They're having a conversation about impossible things. This is how it goes:

"How old are you?" said the Queen.

"I'm seven and a half exactly."

"Well, you needn't say exactly" the Queen remarked: "I can believe that without that. Now I'll give you something to believe. I am just one hundred and one, five months and a day."

"I can't believe that!" said Alice.

"Can't you?" the Queen said. "Try again. Draw a long breath and shut your eyes."

Alice laughed. "There's no use in trying," she said, "one can't believe impossible things."

"Well, I dare say you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was your age, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

I think that modern Christians may secretly set the Ascension in one of those categories of "six impossible things." That it's not that sort of thing that's easy to believe, at least not if we take it literally, that Jesus levitates and flies off to another place. It's a beautiful image, but it's hard to relate to maybe. But I think the Ascension is one of the most essential and core truths of our faith practice.

There is a truth to it that is captured succinctly in the Collect for the day. Listen to this again, "Almighty God whose blessed son our Savior Jesus Christ ascended far above all heavens that he might fill all things." Notice the prayer doesn't say he ascended *to* Heaven, but "far above all heavens." He didn't fly somewhere else. His followers were much more bold in saying he transcended the whole notion of heaven as somewhere "out there" - opened the way for us to know God filling all things. That's what St. Paul is going after in the epistle where he says, "Christ is all in all." So heaven can't be only "out there" and "someday," it has to be and start from here - now and always.

It's meant to rewrite our whole notion of spirituality and religion, and its primary fruit is power in our lives, now. Notice how many times "power" shows up in every one of the readings today. Paul says, "I pray that God may enlighten the eyes of your heart to know... what is the immeasurable greatness of God's power in Christ who fills all in all." Jesus says in Acts, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses." And in Luke, he says, "Stay here until you are clothed with power from on high."

I'm afraid that the Church's history with power is not that good, that most of our history, we have confused what power is and how it works. That power has so often been used to dominate and control. But this kind of power only works from fear, and so it's inert. It doesn't give life - it takes it. The power that we're being invited into here is of a completely different kind. We often call it the power of love. Which is not so much a warm feeling, but it's the power of relatedness. The power of solidarity. The creative power to act, to do, to be, to become. It's the kind of power that generates more of itself with whatever it touches.

So, it's ascending above all notions of heaven as "out there" and starting to experience heavenly power filling all things, in our lives, right now.

Most of us, I think, would like to have more of that kind of power in our lives - to feel like we are more agents than victims. And sometimes that kind of power, that kind of presence can feel distant, or maybe like it's one of those impossible things. But remember, this is like Alice discovers, impossibility is more of a statement of our own perception. It's not necessarily reality - it's how we are coming at it. So, believing impossible things is about taking another look, from another angle, and then diving in, like Alice, to find out what happens next.

We can do that with any impossible thing in our life. So, let's try it now. Following the advice of the White Queen, just close your eyes, take a breath, and think of some impossible thing in your life right now. Could be anything. Could be world peace but try to make it more specific: "I wish I had a better relationship with my parents." You can find your own, your kids, your boss, your body, or "I wish that our political life were less fractured and acidic than it is, and we could talk to one another instead of over one another."

So, when you find that thing that feels impossible, that seems impossible to start with, just breathe for another moment into this Ascension truth and possibility - that love fills *all* things. And just ask, "What is the next super small action that love could take in this impossible situation?" Just the next action. And notice what shifts, where suddenly where there was impossibility, there might suddenly be a next step.

That is power. That is the power of roots to break stones, of rivers to carve canyons.

The powerful thing about what *Alice in Wonderland* does is she just steps in, dives in, over and over and over again, without having to know the whole picture. With curiosity, imagination, courage, grit, and the impossible becomes accessible with step by step by step.

So, I just came back from two weeks' away, taking a lot of steps. I walked with my colleagues' group, across England, along Hadrian's Wall, the Roman Wall. We walked about 15 to 20 miles a day. Our Apple watches, and Fitbits said it was about 40,000 steps a day. And when you're walking like that, it gives you a lot of time to ponder and wonder.

And so I was pondering a lot of what had just happened, the celebration of new ministry and this, this way that we're walking together. And as I walked, I kept hearing little slices of things that happened in that liturgy as we walked, I was hearing over and over again, Bishop Jeff quoting the line from *Angels in America*, "More Love. Now the great work begins." And I was pondering what the preacher, Phil, said, "All that we need to do to make it, to let the power loose among us, is to love one another. Always, in every season, no matter what. No matter who, no matter when, just love one another." And then I was hearing in my head over and over the choir singing, "God has work for us to do."

And I come back convinced more than ever that if we just walk with each other in this way, daily. This kind of love, which is solidarity, which is recognition of the relatedness that has always been, that that kind of Ascension power opens our eyes to see God in everyone and everything. It's right here. It's now. It is power released within us, and among us, and through us. It's unmistakable and the impossible becomes accessible. All these little daily doses of heaven just start erupting all over the place. It's not that they weren't there before, but we have eyes to see it, and to be it. It's already happening.

So, my call coming back is to start believing more impossible things before breakfast. Just start imagining, and being aware that we can't see it all and we don't need to see it all. But we can just do the next thing, and it releases power. That possibility that we can't see yet - to notice it, to call it out, lift it up in ourselves and in others, and above all to just practice that daily power of love - the next action in all of our lives. God has work for us to do.

Last line, I listen and hear the Apostle Paul. He was really just quoting liturgy and I believe it's Ephesians when he says, it's almost a mantra among us: "Glory to God, whose power working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine." Imagine that. "Glory to God, from generation to generation in the church and in Christ Jesus forever."

And God's people said, Amen.