

Ascension Sunday YC 2022

For God So Loved the World
By the Rev. Salying Wong

For God so loved the world. For God so loved the whole world. For God so loved the whole world that Jesus ascended. The ascension isn't about Jesus leaving for good. The ascension is Jesus leaving so as to abide with all his followers, those present and those yet to come. He said, "I am going away and I am coming to you." I imagine the ascension as Jesus' presence—like water vapor that rises, is moved about by the Holy Spirit; it coalesces and rains down again the quenching presence of God.

In the ascension, Jesus is not only known to those disciples with whom he walked, but to all future disciples. Today, in this last part of the priestly prayer of Jesus, Jesus prays for those who *will* come to believe. He says they will know him as intimately as those who have walked with him in his incarnated self. That is why the Gospel of John takes pains to describe this intimacy with an overabundance of similar meaning phrases: "As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." This language folds in on itself, like the petals of a rose.

For Jesus so loves the world, that he ascended, so as to be with us in present tense. He is with us in the depth of our human experience and knows sometimes it is unbearable—and he comes to us; he abides with us. But the ascension is not the incarnation—and because we are incarnated beings, the ascended Christ sometimes doesn't feel enough. It doesn't feel like a hand to hold in the dark, when we are grasping for what has been torn from us and gasping for breath from violence, rage and loss. No, in the throes of such devastation, one

only wants the power to reverse time. One only wants past tense to be present tense. The prayer is, “Just give me my life as I knew it, just give it back.” And reckoning that we are powerless to do so, we can resent it and a God who doesn’t exercise power on our behalf.

I read one post of the daughter of one of the teachers that was killed in the Uvalde school shooting. “I want you back. I want you back.” Oh, that I could give that to her, I would. I would do it for everyone who is finding themselves reaching out for the child, sibling, mother or friend, reaching out only to grasp empty air. I would, but I can’t. I don’t have that kind of power.

I am thinking about power right now because of the powerlessness I feel and the edge of hopelessness I walk. How long, O Lord, how long shall we endure such devastation? For violence prowls our streets, seeking the vulnerable to devour. I want the world fixed. I want the vision from the Book of Revelation—a new heaven and a new earth, where every tear shall be wiped away. I want it today.

It has become clear to me that the resurrection of Jesus over 2000 years ago did not fix the world in the way I want it to be fixed. So what is the power of the resurrection?

First, I want to consider its opposite, crucifixion power. Imagine a lonely cross on a hill, upon which our Christ was crucified. Now pan back and see the two who were crucified with him. Now pan back further and more crosses populate the hill. Keep panning back and you will see hundreds of crosses covering the hills. In Roman times, these hills of the crucified were the first things you encountered when you came into the city. This was the message: “Don’t mess with us!” The empire ruled by crucifixion power—fear, torture, death. All of this was to ensure the *pax Romana*, the peace of Rome. Speaking to its citizens, the Empire said, “Crucifixion ensures the peace—your safety and security. The fear you feel is actually power and peace.” And so the empire gaslit its citizens.

Crucifixion power is seductive because it is actually subtle. The desire for revenge, for evening the score, for putting someone in their place, for feeling in control, for disappearing them so you don't have to be bothered anymore. Consider how this kind of power worms its ways insidiously into the human heart. But is this power, even when we wield it, actually a power we can claim as ours—or, as I suspect, a power that takes over us and uses us for its own purposes?

What then, in a world of pain and violence and death—what does one make of the resurrection of the body? What does one make of the on-going presence of Christ abiding with us after the ascension? What is this gift of resurrection power given to all those who believe?

Resurrection power is hard to recognize. Because we are so acquainted with crucifixion power, we might be deceived that it is the only kind of power there is. But resurrection power is always about life, not just any kind of life, but life after death, after terrible suffering, after being mauled by crucifixion power. Resurrection power puts boundaries around our painful emotions—emotions that would seduce us to spread more pain and death—it holds us and waits with us. Resurrection power is the unspoken, unnamed presence of love that waits with us as long as it takes—as long as it takes for us to crawl out of the rubble and stand again (*anastasis*—to stand again). Resurrection power is the power of God within us that helps to dismantle crucifixion power with the power of love.

At the clergy meeting with Bishop Lucinda this week, after the shooting, she told the story of the Mothers of the Disappeared in Argentina. From 1976-1983, the military junta of Argentina disappeared many young people who resisted its rule. Disappeared meant being forced to prison and tortured or executed. It was the mothers of the disappeared that faced off the military junta. On Mother's Day, hundreds of mothers gathered with pictures of their children. Each mother took a turn, yelling out the name of their child. After each name, they would all say together, "Presente!" Present.

Resurrection power does not allow those who have been tortured and murdered to disappear. The ascension shouts across time and space, "Presente!" It is this power that is given to renew the face of the earth. While those who wield crucifixion power wish to disappear those who threaten them, the power of the resurrection defies even the finality of death. Jesus would not disappear. Out of the grave, he said, "Presente!" When he ascended to be with us across time and space, he would not leave us orphaned. "Presente!" And he is in us, we are in him, and in love, we are one as Jesus is one with God. Jesus said, "You will do greater things than me." Glory to God who working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. We are equipped by resurrection power, Jesus in us, to contest the forces of death and torture and to dismantle the seduction of crucifixion power—within us and in the world. For God so loves the world, for Jesus so loves us, he is ascended so that he might be present tense, present to us, empowering us. Presente.