

[Acts 1:6-14](#)

[Psalm 68:1-10, 33-36](#)

[1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11](#)

[John 17:1-11](#)

A SERMON PREACHED BY THE REVEREND ALISTAIR SO ON THE SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, THE SUNDAY AFTER THE ASCENSION, MAY 4, 2008, AT ALL HALLOWS CHURCH, SOUTH RIVER PARISH, IN DAVIDSONVILLE, MARYLAND

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

If you have ever been to the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral to witness a space shuttle launch, you would have felt the immensity and power of a spacecraft taking off---an almost deafening and spellbinding experience---that shakes up your whole being. And if you have had the experience of walking on Cocoa Beach the night after the launch, you may have seen hundreds and thousands of stars in the night sky. How can you not be overwhelmed by the solemnity of the star-studded heavens? Many of the sacred stories in our faith tradition have to do with the sky, the heavens above. Today is the Sunday after Ascension Day, when the Church commemorates Jesus' bodily ascension into heaven. For many centuries, the ancient three-tiered worldview worked just fine: the heavens above, the earth beneath, and water under the earth. Since then, we have ventured a little into the infinite vastness of the heavens, only to find out that we cannot possibly live without cumbersome and artificially arranged environments. Even then, we run the risk of cosmic radiation. There is just so much we still don't know about the heavens; there is just so much we still don't know about space. But that's alright. Perhaps that fact can serve as a contemporary interpretation for the Ascension---that Jesus ascended to a place that we don't fully understand. If that's what our faith is telling us: that forty days after Jesus' physical resurrection, he ascended to an unknown place, as the faithful of the church on earth, then we must necessarily be filled with both hopes and fears.

If we immerse ourselves in the mystery of the Ascension of Jesus Christ, we will have both hopes and fears. Our hopes are likely to be the assurance that life does have a greater meaning; that we have a "place" to go beyond this existence; that our toil and labors will lead us to harvest in our eternal abode. On the other hand, our fears are likely to be the fact that we still have to bear the uncertainty of the hereafter; that we might not like the next place prepared for us; that somehow the "what if's" still exist---what if we just vanish, what if we will be punished, what if we will just suffer..... I suspect that most of our fears come from the fact that we know that we will lose control beyond this life---not that we have complete control in our lives now. We realize that we will have to completely acknowledge that God is in control in this life and beyond.

Friends, do you still have fears despite all that our faith promises? Although everyone has his or her ups and downs in spiritual growth, fears ought not to abound in a healthy Christian life. I mean, do you have demons in your dreams? Or like the doubting Thomas, do you suspect that God cannot deliver what he promises? Fears mostly come from lack of trust, lack of knowledge, and lack of faith. Then it follows that in order to conquer our fears, we need to acquire a healthy dose of knowledge and faith. In other words, we need to be able to feel God's love more tangibly in order to forego our fears. The good news is that luckily, faith and knowledge are interrelated. Faith without knowledge can lead to superstition; knowledge without faith won't get us to the core of our human experience---the part that deals with our souls. Anselm of Canterbury teaches that faith seeks understanding. The more we love God, the more we want to learn all about God. Can you say you love someone and you don't want to learn anything about that person? That would be absurd! In other words, as our faith grows, our

intellect and our experience about God grow at the same time. Faith coupled with our empirical experience of God can truly dissipate our fears.

I have yet one very important point to make. Friends, as followers of Jesus Christ, as much as we want to get rid of our fears, we believe not that we may lose our fears. We believe, rather, so that God may transform our fears into a source of hope. I recall that a few years ago, I went on a retreat to the Claggett Retreat Center with the youth group from my previous parish. There was a ropes course there. A ropes course is a challenging outdoor personal development and team building activity, which requires group effort for success. We spent a whole day working on team building and steadily advancing the level of difficulty in the ropes course. Finally, we got to the most challenging part of the course. I saw poles extending twenty to thirty feet into the sky, joined by thin-looking ropes. We really had to put our teamwork to the test. Let me tell you: I'm not afraid of heights. But when you are up on a pole twenty feet above the ground, with only air around you as a companion, the feeling can be quite different. I was scared. I was full of fears. But with cooperation and reliance on each other, I slowly managed to contain my fears. We really helped each other out. In the end, we all made it through the course safe and sound.

Reflecting on that experience, I think that my fear was transformed by the community of friends. I knew that I was not alone up in the air. I kind of knew that everything would be just fine, with our safety devices attached. But there was always the "what if's." That's why we all had to sign a release form, clearing any liability that the ropes course management may have. But the spirit of our team for a moment transformed my fears into a source of hope---the hope that we will all finish this challenging course together.

Likewise, our life of faith is sometimes like a ropes course. By faith, we know that in the end all will be fine, because God has revealed himself to us in Jesus Christ. And through the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, we have the hope of everlasting life. However, we tend to let the "what if's" control our lives from time to time. But if we stay the course in the Church, our fellow pilgrims will help each other out in our pilgrimage to God, however challenging the course may be.

As we journey forth together at All Hallows, there will be times of uncertainty. There will be times when we rather go back to the old ways, just as the murmuring Israelites wanted to go back to Egypt after crossing the Red Sea, when faced with difficulties. My job as rector is to remind us often of our mission and vision so that we can stay the course and finish the race that is set before us. Our mission is what we are called to do as a parish. We are called to live and share God's salvific love in Jesus Christ through our Word and Sacraments, our liturgy and music, our spiritual formation and stewardship, our fellowship and outreach. Our vision is what we see ourselves becoming with God's help. We want to build our parish as a church where our centuries-old tradition continues to meet the promises of God in our own day. What is our tradition? We have been the blessed recipient of the best of Anglicanism as we are endowed with two distinct, beautiful, and architecturally different sanctuaries; we have experienced a variety of worship styles in the history of our parish; and we have found our identity in the Anglo-Catholic tradition of the Church. We are still working on how to best express that in our setting. What are God's promises? God promises our salvation in Jesus Christ. And Jesus came so that we may have life, and have it abundantly. Our vision then is that make the expression of our common life match the abundant life promised by God. Indeed, that vision is a high calling for us. But it's not out of reach, because with God's help, we will get closer and closer to that ideal.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, if we focus on the big picture, our fears may indeed be transformed by God into a source of hope. And we will be able to love happier lives both within our parish and in our personal lives. Surely, there will always be uncertainty. But God will transform that into a holy

uncertainty, meaning that he will walk alongside us, and he will not leave us comfortless. Surely, we may still have some fears, but God will transform them into a holy fear---a sense of the awesomeness of God. Indeed, there is simply a fine line between fear and awe. Faith is the decisive factor in turning fear into awe.

Beloved, let us face the future of All Hallows with boldness, conquering fear, as Jesus has conquered death, the ultimate curse of humankind. And when we look into the star-studded night sky and see the next space shuttle launch, may we be filled with the awe of the Almighty Creator! Indeed, let us “cross the threshold of hope” into realm of abundant life effected by the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ.

And thanks be to God who has already given us the victory in Jesus Christ! Amen.

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All Hallows Parish
Davidsonville, MD