Ascension Cycle B

During the church year we celebrate a series

 Of what are called the **feasts of the Lord**

 On the one hand, these feasts are pretty **simple** to understand

 For as their title implies

 They are often recall some **event** in the life of Christ

 Such as his birth at Christmas

 Or his baptism

 Or his presentation in the temple

 Or they celebrate some **aspect** of is divinity

 Such as the feast of “holy name of Jesus”

Some of these feasts, however

Are not as transparent

Such as the feast of the transfiguration

Or the feast of epiphany …

And, I would suggest

There is something of a transparency problem

 With today’s Fest of the ascensions

 Which maybe a little more **difficult** to understand

 Than feasts of his birth or his baptism

Part of the difficulty in cracking this feast

 Might be due to that fact that Jesus’ ascension

 **Does not appear** in all of the gospels:

 *It is not in the gospel of John*

 *And it is not in the gospel of Matthew*

It does occur in the gospel we read today from Mark

 But virtually all biblical scholars would content

That this 16th chapter was not original to Mark

And was added in the 2nd century

 While Mark was originally written in the first century

It does occur actually **twice** in the writings of **Luke**

 Both in Luke’s gospel

 And in the acts of the apostles from which we read today

 But ironically it seems to take place at two different times

 For in the **gospel** of Luke it seems to occur

 On the day of Jesus’ **resurrection**

 But in Acts it takes place 40 days after that event

 Which would place it on a **Thursday**

Thus, as some of us remember

 We use to celebrate **“Ascension” Thursday**

 Which was a holy day of obligation

 And should have taken place 3 days ago

So who is to be believed in this **quagmire**

 Of contradictory evidence

 And what do we make of a feast

 That seems to suggest that Jesus’ **body**

 Is floating somewhere out there in outer space

 I mean, we’ve send **astronauts** up there

 And they haven’t found it

 And we’ve got the **Hubble** telescope

 That can see for several billion light years

 And the Hubble hasn’t photographed it?

Some preachers because of this quagmire of evidence

Actually choose to ignore the feast

One blogger recently wrote:

Ascension is a mystery to me. The whole idea of Jesus ascending through the air into heaven is hard for someone who has seen the [pictures of earth](http://antwrp.gsfc.nasa.gov/apod/ap951225.html) from space taken by the Astronauts. Instead I think of Glenda in the movie [The Wizard of Oz](http://thewizardofoz.warnerbros.com/cmp/photo.htm), rising up into the air in her bubble with all the Munchkins waving and shouting "Goodbye, Goodbye" in their little squeaky voices.

She was not alone; another wrote:

It’s like a bad B-movie … the camera cuts to an overhead shot of the apostles - dazed, mouths agape, like Gomer Pyle looking up at a skyscraper for the first time. Shazzam, he's gone; they all stood there looking up as if at Cape Canaveral for an Apollo space shot. We can almost hear them all say. "Our leader is gone. Now what?"

While we can employ contemporary images

 And astronomic metaphors

 To poke fun at this challenging feast

 I also believe contemporary society

 Gives us cues

 About how to make sense of it.

While many of us think about the month of May, for example,

 As a time of beautiful weather,

 The end of school

 The invasion of the G-20

It is actually one of the most,

if not the most important **leave-taking times**

in the yearly calendar

for example the National Center for Educational Statistics

 projects almost **1.8 million college graduations**

 will take place in May and June

and as OSP knows well, May and especially June are also

 Are top months for **weddings** to occur

Given the millions of graduations and weddings

It is not a surprise that May 15

 Begins the high season for moving in this country

 A fact not lost on the Verizon phone company

 That around mother’s day began airing

 What some considered a very **funny**

 Others considered a very **annoying**

 TV ad for their droid Razr phone

 That featured a mother and daughter together in tears

 Because the daughter is moving into an apartment

 4.2 miles away

 And the mother is not only going to miss the daughter

 But is fearful that in that 4.2 miles

 She is going to get lost.

 Something that the droid razr

 With its gps system

 Will apparently prevent

 So a happy ending is seems to ensue

 As a completely clueless young salesman

 Exits to the back of the story

 To fetch two of these miracle phones.

All the histrionics aside

Leave-taking can be a traumatic and life altering event

That is something many of you know

From watching your **children** move away to distant cities

Your **relatives** move out of their homes into nursing

or other care facilities

 or for anyone who has buried a **beloved relative**

 or **honored friend**

the natural response to such leave-taking

 is the complex yet universal human process of grieving

Pastoral theologian Herbert Anderson

 Who with Ken Mitchell penned the classic

 *All our losses, all our griefs*

 Believes that the task of grieving is to create

 A life-sustaining memory.

He writes:

The work of grieving happens between remembering and hoping, between building a treasured memory and anticipating a new future. Grief often gets stuck when mourners are unable to explore those wounds that hurt the most … In order to find hope again that will heal hearts broken by tragic loss, we need to fashion a cherishable memory, practice ritual lament, and discover the promise of God that transcends death.

In some ways not only the **feast** of Ascension

 The **very book** of the acts of the apostles

 From which we read this day

 And so often throughout the Easter season

 Is documentation of the **grief-work** of the early church

 After their leader and Lord has passed from their sight

 And the earthly Jesus was no more.

As Anderson suggests

 The book of acts, which on the **surface**

 Chronicles the **missionary** efforts of the early community

 Actually documents the journey from remembering to hope

And gives us glimpses of how the followers of Jesus

In all their loses and all their griefs

fashioned a cherishable and life-giving memory

What is compelling about this scriptural journey

 Is that the fashion of a life-giving memory

 Was accomplished by fashioning a life-giving **mission**

they took seriously the admonition of the angels

 the two men in white standing next to them

 who literally brought them back to earth …

 suggesting it was not looking up into the heavens

 that was the point of religion

 the point of grieving after Jesus

 the point of crafting a life giving memory

 was being engaged with the world.

There is an interesting tidbit from mission history

 It seems when European missionaries came to South Africa

they were faced with a theological conundrum.

Because the indigenous people believed

 That god lived in the ground

Caves and holes were sacred places

 Africans committed their beloved dead to the ground

 To be with god

And when an African was facing life’s challenges

a sacred ritual is to return to the opening near one’s home

pour the froth of traditional beer into the earth

before asking advice of the ancients who buried there

However European missionaries felt creed bound to teach

that God lived in the sky

 the world was a place of Sin

and that deep in the earth was only hell

in their preaching and teaching

they had to reorientate the African psyche

from earth to sky

from what they thought was hell to heaven

 I can’t help but muse, in that spirit,

 Whether the feast of ascension helps us reconceive a feast

 not with Jesus floating off into space

 But Jesus, through his disciples, taking root deep in this world

 What St. Francis called Sister earth

 And caring for this earth .. and those who inhabit it

 Is, like the first disciples, essential for the task of grieving

 Of building a healing and vibrant Jesus – memory

 Of actually “re-membering” the human body

 Re-connecting, repairing, reconstituting the body

 So often torn apart

 But war and greed and strife

There was a great novel about “remembering”

 A novel that was made into a pretty good film

 Entitled “The Legend of Bagger Vance”

 It is the story of Rannulph Junah

 The best golfer in Savannah

 In a relationship with Adele

 On his way to certainly “a wonderful life”

 But world war I intervenes

 And in the combat he is

the only survivor of a dangerous mission

and his return is not the building of a healing memory

and he can’t return to Savannah for 15 years

When he does return

The city is depressed

Adele’s father has committed suicide during the depression

And she has inherited her father’s golf course.

Adele has a dream to bring to Savannah

the greatest match ever played on the greatest golf course

in order to pay off the debt and the taxes

so she rounds up the 2 greatest golfers of their time,

Bobby Jones and Walter Hagen to play for $10,000.

the townspeople insist on having one of their own compete and Rannulph Junnah, now an alcoholic and bum,

is rounded up

but he’s forgotten

he’s forgotten how to play

he’s forgotten how to be disciplined

and forgotten his authentic swing from 15 years earlier

 That’s when Bagger Vance shows up

offers to be Junnah's caddy

and help him regain his "authentic swing"

 Bagger, of course, is not just a caddy

 He’s a life mentor

 filled with folk wisdom about getting back on track

 and staying there

 when Junnah asks how he might get his authentic swing back

Bagger says:

Yep... Inside each and every one of us is one true authentic swing... Somethin' we was born with... Somethin' that's ours and ours alone... Somethin' that can't be taught to ya or learned... Somethin' that got to be remembered... Over time the world can, rob us of that swing... It get buried inside us under all our wouldas and couldas and shouldas... Some folk even forget what their swing was like...

On this feast between memory and hope

 This feast of universal grieving

 This feast for building an authentic memory

 A cherishable mission

 We too are called to “remember”

 Remember God’s authentic swing from heaven to earth

 From death to life

 And the Arm of the church with a vessel of water

 Swinging over us .. to remake us

 In the image of the authentic Christ.

 Remember what was promised us in baptism

 And how we are commissioned from this table

And no matter what we are grieving in ourselves

 The loss of family or health

 The loss of job or well-being

Not to look up … but, like those angels in white

 To look to the side and see the faces of our neighbors

 Because if we are not grieving some of them

 most certainly are

We swing wide our open arms

 Open wide our hearts

 So that we can be re-membered, refashioned, reconstituted

 Recreated in the Spirit of the one once crucified

 Now ascended .. whom we no longer grieve

 But honor as Lord and God forever and ever.