

Sermon for Ascension Sunday 20 May 2012  
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Outside the window, as I wrote this, I can see a shoebox nailed to the tree. A series of birds fly to the tree. They land on the branches near the box and then hop down to land on its edge. Inside are two fledglings. Early in the morning, while we were at prayer near this same window, we noticed our puppy outside playing oddly. She was pouncing towards and away from something. I left prayer to see, on the guess that it might be what I feared, and found a small bird with no tail feathers stumbling and falling. We brought our dog Kita into the house and left the bird to see what would happen. Would it die? Would it recover? Should we let things take their course? My half hour of prayer was very distracted. I was worried about God's bird out there, and about its parents chirping anxiously. When prayer ended we found a shoebox and some shredded paper. I brought a ladder and nailed it up 10 feet off the ground, and we carefully placed the bird in its "nest of human hands" and retreated to watch. Mid afternoon when I came home for lunch I found Kita had just stunned another fledgling. Can you blame an animal for its instincts? This bird was in better shape but stunned. I picked it up and it joined the other, who was still alive and awake.

Birds should fly up and be free. I do not know if birds think in the way that I do. But I imagine birds want their chicks to learn to fly. Starting from a nest up a tree, that first flight is a risk-laden event. It is not like a child's first steps. The fall and the consequences are much greater. And few children are pounced on by even the most innocent of giant dogs.

It has been said the God became human so that humans could become divine. And so the birth, the Gospel-storied life of Christ, and the terrible suffering and death are all part of our journey. These are not all actual events for us. But they are spiritual ones we must pass through. Before we can be born again into the Spirit of Christ, to live the New Life, following the commandments of God and walking in his holy ways, as the BCP says so well. Before that, we must die. We die to self-before-others and we die to seeing the world as chaotic and ungoverned. We rise to live with Jesus for the sake of those who have yet to find him. We rise to a world which is in God's hand, and filled with his presence, so that all things, even "bad things" become vehicles of his grace to us.

What we don't hear much of is that we must learn to fly, to rise with him and leave even this blessed creation of the Father's behind. The Ascension is a lesson we must practice in our inner lives too. Flying, the first flight, is hard work. It is high risk.

Let me begin to talk about flying by telling you about my children. Like birds needing to leave the nest, children need to fly away too. Last Summer our oldest, Tom, had planned to go to Asia to teach English. He had a friend who was going to fix him up with a job and give him a place to stay until he was sorted out. He was staying with us for a week or two before he went. The two weeks became a month and then longer. Small obstacles kept appearing to delay him. One day Lucy, my wife and his mother, sat down next to him at the computer desk and said, "Book your tickets today. Then email your friend and tell him you are arriving." Oh, Mum," he said, "I can't do this just because you told me to!" "You've had two months to do this on your own." she said. My wife can be very fierce. A few days later we saw him off at the airport. We were both nearly in tears. Our little boy was going to Asia and we had no idea when we would see him, and if he would be happy, or successful, or safe, or survive.

But he had to fly! Staying home with us he was losing nerve by the day. Lucy, a spiritually wise woman, saw this - and pushed him off the edge.

God looks at us and longs for us to fly. He nurtures us in the growth of our bodies, our minds and our souls too. God sends his friends into our lives repeatedly to open our eyes and our hearts to his presence. He shows us his constant love. And he sent his son, so that we could learn from his life the nature of his indestructible loving support. This is the God whose love will never let us go. God's Spirit is the breath of our living and the wind that will catch our wings and lift us up as disciples and apostles of Jesus and catch us when we fall.

But will we ever leave the nest?

We have a tendency to stay in the nest and hope for food. A chick that stays and is fed reaches that perfect moment for flying. But a few more weeks and still being fed, and you have a fat, flabby blob of a bird that is now too heavy for first flight and too lazy to give it a try.

There are two things in my life which keep me spiritually fat and blobby, and stop me flying for Jesus. I worry about time and money.

During Holy Week and Easter I missed the resurrection. I did not leave my nest and fly with Jesus as he broke the bonds of death and leapt up through rock and earth and darkness into the dawn of Easter. I missed being with him as he played with the last stars of morning and then settled gently down on a tree stump waiting for his friend Mary to turn up, so he could give her a shock and a hug. I missed him sneaking up behind the disciples to tease and challenge, to heal and forgive. I missed the wind in his hair as he came and went as easily as a sparrow on the breeze of the morning.

I was too busy organizing his resurrection here at Grace Church. I was too sure that I had to get everything right. With heavy, earth-bound feet I plodded through the motions of the resurrection but never got a hair's breadth off the ground. "Jesus," I could have said, "I am simply too busy. You have no idea how many important things I have to do. I must tidy the nest of the church liturgy. I'll catch you next year!"

The reason we have the word Sabbath in our spiritual tradition is to teach us to not be attached to time. We are instructed by God, in the Ten Commandments, to waste one entire day a week, and just goof-off. We are to do nothing important, no work, nothing with a "should" or an "ought to" attached to it. This will teach us, if we have the faith and courage to practice it, to take our busyness, our self-importance and ourselves in general, less seriously. It will allow us time to hang over the edge of the nest and imagine flying with Jesus until, one day, we do.

Tithing our money is the same. "How much money is enough?" goes the saying. "Just a little more than I have right now." Is the answer we always give. Money is a serious business, and our culture with its serious TV news about bank crashes and stock markets and the economy all makes us twitchy about having enough (and a parachute). But if you tithe, if you take the first tenth of what you receive, and give it a way, what would happen? Well you have a choice. You either collapse with a nervous breakdown over the thought of all that cash you are handing over with no hope of anything coming back from it. Or you learn to take your cash much less seriously. You look at the guys who collect beer bottles for a living and notice they actually smile at you if you talk to them. You listen to your grandparents who had happy lives on a shoestring. You might even look at Jesus, who didn't have a proper paying job, or even a high school graduation certificate, and was fairly cheery about life.

"How is it that angels can fly?" it is asked. "It is because they take themselves so lightly."

The mother and father birds are still running flights in and out of the cardboard nest I built. I cannot tell what will become of our rescued birds. But I know that if they do not fly they will die. They must risk again and let go of the safety of the cardboard nest.

I know that in the life of faith if we do not let go of ourselves, and edge towards the place where our guaranteed safety comes to an end we will die to God's Spirit and shrivel in our faith and starve. We need, each of us, to let go of control over our time, and our money, and jump.

The Ascension is the final act of the Jesus who was born of Mary and walked among us as flesh and blood. He let go of everything and became so spiritually light that he could simply let gravity have nothing to hold. When you watch a bird glide across the air you are offered a teaching from God on the spiritual life.

I hope the birds on my little box will fly. I hope I will fly more frequently. I hope you will put down the lead weights of busyness and money-worries and fly with Jesus as well. Give them away, at least in part. Be light. Let the breath of the Spirit fill the wings of your soul.

Happy Ascension Sunday