

Ascension

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Churches of the Good Shepherd and Holy Comforter, Trinity Korean Congregation

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I can't think about Ascension without seeing those old stained glass windows and paintings that show Jesus' bare feet in midair. The story in Acts says that the disciples stood around gazing up into heaven. Did they watch his sandals fall off as he rose above their heads? Did they see the dirt on the bottoms of his feet? How long did they stand there until the angels came and prodded them out of their paralysis?

The imagery about feet and heads that runs through the readings for this feast is amazingly provocative once we notice it and pay attention. And in the midst of it there's a whole lot of gospel overturning going on. Think for a minute about all the feet that turn up in the gospels. Jesus heals a man whose friends take him up on the roof and let him down over Jesus' head. Jesus tells him to get up on his own two feet and walk. The woman with a dubious reputation washes Jesus' feet with her tears, and dries them with her hair. Jesus begins the last act of his life's drama by washing the feet of his disciples. His own feet are bruised and bloodied as he stumbles along the road to Calvary, where they're finally nailed to a cross. And now the resurrected one bids farewell with his feet.

Feet are our closest connection with the earth, from which Genesis insists we're made – they're the earthiest and presumably dirtiest part of us, which is why getting water to wash your feet is such a big deal in first century hospitality. But the host doesn't usually wash a guest's feet; a servant does. Jesus challenges his disciples to that role, and at the same time to be his friends and friends of all others. In some sense, he's told us that connecting with the dirt and pain of all humanity is the way to connect with God.

The Ephesians writer is starkly clear about why all this stuff about feet is so important. He says of Jesus that "God has placed this world under his feet, and made him head over all." The suffering servant is now Lord of all. And perhaps there's a reminder there to the disciples who jockeyed for the best seats, wanting to sit at Jesus' right and his left – if you want to win this race, wash feet.

On Maundy Thursday this year I got to wash feet in Florence (Italy), and last year in Jerusalem. In years earlier I've washed feet in Nevada and Oregon. Each time I am amazed by the vulnerability that people offer in coming forward, and I am humbled by the condition of many of those feet – bent, blistered, bunioned, often with broken blood vessels. Once in a while there is a child, with feet yet to experience all those human indignities born of walking and working and stumbling in this garden.

Jesus' feet have been there, too. And, indeed, they're still here – his feet are our feet. Those feet of his with nail holes are still around, though they may look like an amputee at Walter Reed or a child in Afghanistan who's stepped on a land mine. The reminder is that those are Jesus' feet, and they are ours to wash, and dry with tenderness, and maybe kiss, too.

Jesus washed his disciples' feet to show them something about service and friendship. He also tells them to go and baptize – to wash heads and persons – to show the world something about his family and friends. The great cycle of the Easter story begins with heads receiving ashes. It reaches its climax as heads once marked with a dirty sign of death are blessed and washed with water. At the Easter Vigil in Florence we baptized a Nigerian toddler, asleep when we began and startled awake by the water on his head. That child will grow up speaking English, Italian, and some tribal language of Nigeria. That child will grow steadier on his feet, and bring them to be washed in years ahead. His baptism expects that as he walks through this world, he'll meet Jesus, and be met as part of Jesus' body. Do we meet all parts of the body, and recognize them as Jesus?

The body of Jesus is truly here, both aging and born anew, over and over and over again through the centuries since that day the disciples stood around gazing into heaven, not quite sure what to do next.

That dance of feet and heads continues – maybe we should sing, “head, shoulders, knees, and toes” in church, too, and not just at church camp. We are the body of Christ, in all our many parts, honored and less so. The world is under Jesus' feet, and he is head of all.

Picture it again – Jesus' feet on their way to heaven. Maybe it's a graphic reminder that it's pretty heavenly to take a load off, when you've been standing around all day, bearing the world's burdens. Taking a load off is how we understand the work of the cross. There is no burden left to weigh us down if his feet can float above our heads.

The dance goes on to the tune of blessing – that's what Luke says Jesus is doing when he departs: “he led them out to Bethany, and while he was blessing them, withdrew.” When the disciples finally wake up, they respond in kind, they go back to Jerusalem in great joy, and “were continually in the temple, blessing God.”

That's what we're doing here tonight, blessing God. Blessing God for 150 years of being the body of Christ in this part of the world, washing feet and heads. The ongoing challenge is not to stay here, staring up into heaven at those feet. Eventually they disappear, maybe when the angels arrive. And the angels' question remains for us, “why, indeed, are you disciples standing around looking at Jesus' feet, when his body is right here?” There is a part of each of us, and of every church community, that would prefer to focus on where Jesus has gone, rather than where he is, where he abides. It's a way of letting ourselves off the hook. If we can just stand here and bless, maybe we don't have to go out there and wash feet, or feed people, or change the systems that keep

some folks hungry. Jesus tells those disciples to stay in the city until they receive Holy Spirit, but he also tells them that they'll have work to do when the spirit comes.

That work is the great commission and great commandment work, and in the words the gospel uses here, "repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things." Being a witness doesn't mean just standing around watching. A witness is supposed to tell the story in order to change something that's not right, in order to achieve justice. Here, the story is about a new relationship between God and humanity, about the body that continues to live here, and about Jesus' abiding presence in that body of his friends.

Jesus' departure, his ascension, is supposed to remind all those witnesses that God's reign is still arriving, and that they have that story-telling work to do. And that work doesn't stop with telling – it must continue with walking, serving, washing feet, blessing heads, and building a new community that does indeed resemble the body of Christ.

Do you remember that old country western song, "These Boots were Made for Walking"? Well, these feet were made for walking, and washing, and serving, and they're made for getting us out into the world to meet the rest of Christ's body, and to bless it.