

Ascension Day, 2017
Church of the Holy Trinity

You know a lot of people wonder why we would celebrate Ascension Day at all. Why would we want to celebrate the day Jesus left us? But of course Jesus has not left us...at least not in Spirit. That is what we will be celebrating next Sunday on the Day of Pentecost. Then we will remember that Jesus kept his promise to be with us until the end of the age by sending the Holy Spirit.

But Jesus DID leave us in bodily form. St. Paul said to the Corinthians, "...we once knew Christ from a human point of view..." and he continues: "we know him no longer in that way." (2 Cor 5:16) There is no doubting that we have a different kind of relationship with Jesus than did those first eyewitness disciples. Back in Biblical times we read that when people came looking for Jesus, they most likely got to see him. Perhaps they even sat down and ate with him. Wouldn't evangelism be so much easier if we could just give inquirers after Jesus a street address, or even a Facebook page or hashtag? We could just say: "Go and meet him for yourselves." End of story!

But God had something entirely different in mind.

Some weeks ago Andy and Hector, two of our Vestry members, were ushering for the Sunday service. At the end of the service, a man came in the door and to their great surprise presented them with something he had found just down the street. It was the marble right hand of our statue out front of the boy Jesus! (OK now. How many of you knew who that statue represented? One of our Vestry folk confessed to having thought it was the statue of a woman, and others said they just had no idea who it was.) Well, anyway, the man had found this marble hand and thought it probably belonged to our statue—and he was right. Andy and Hector rushed out the front doors and were able to retrieve a few more fingers and marble fragments around the

base of the statue. We took pictures and sent them off to a monument maker requesting a bid for mending the statue. We contacted our insurance company only to find that the property and casualty deductible had been raised, so that we were pretty sure not to be able to rely upon insurance coverage for the repair. We talked about perhaps bringing the statue back inside the church, where it once stood, in order to protect it better. There were lots of emails flying back and forth among the parish leadership.

And then something interesting happened. The Holy Spirit intervened in our conversation. Diane Reid wrote us that our statue reminded her of a story she had heard once. She was able to find one version of that story online. “During World War II, a church in Strasburg, Germany, was totally destroyed; but a statue of Christ which stood by the altar was almost unharmed. Only the hands of the statue were missing. When the church was rebuilt, a famous sculptor offered to make new hands; but, after considering the matter, the members decided to let it stand as it was—without hands. “For,” they said, “Christ has no hands but our hands to do His work on earth. If we don’t feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, entertain the stranger, visit the imprisoned, and clothe the naked, who will? Christ is depending on us to do the very things which He did while upon earth.” (billygraham.com) Diane said in her email: “We are not called to be a museum, highlighting our past....”

Her words were inspiring, and I was reminded of the time when I was serving in a church in the Frog Hollow section of Hartford where the colored glass window panels of our Sanctuary were being broken one by one by local vandals and the congregation could not afford to replace them except with clear glass. They were very sad about this until we looked at the Easter story of Jesus showing his scarred hands and side to his disciples. We realized that our broken windows were like those scars. They bore witness to the urban ministry in which that congregation was engaged. They labored hard and with few resources to maintain their property as a safe place for the children and families of the neighborhood. They were a Foodshare

distribution location. They had their own small Food Pantry, they housed a daycare facility for low income families, and they even had a little clothing closet. They felt the need to stay right there where God had planted them, and they bore the scars of that choice. They were giving themselves up for others.

So I responded to Diane, saying “I believe you may be correct that this marred statue is very much a sign of your faithful presence in a tough neighborhood. Just the kind of place where Jesus would hang out.” And I was reminded of the words of St. Teresa of Ávila, Spain. She was born in 1515 and authored some of the most profound and poetical writings of Christian mysticism. She wrote the words you find on the cover of your bulletin today: “Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.”

That is what it means to be part of the Jesus movement, as our Presiding Bishop likes to call us. You could spend thousands on this statue repairing, restoring and erasing its scars. But what would it say about this congregation if you took Jesus back into the building, hidden from public view? And would that be true to Jesus? Isn't he all about daring you to go outside the confines of your walls into the neighborhood where he leads the way? What if you left the statue of Jesus right where it is and just as it is and put next to it a sign with Teresa's words? In print large enough to be easily read. In print large enough to remind you of your decision to be the hands and feet and eyes through which Christ is blessing and healing and caring for this neighborhood? The decision is yours. Maybe that's what God had in mind with this ascension plan for Jesus not to stick around in a body forever. Maybe God trusted that we would have it covered. Just sayin'.

The Rev. Dana L. Campbell, Interim Rector