

Sermon: We Believe ...

Year B, Ascension

[Acts 1:1-11](#); [Psalm 47](#); [Ephesians 1:15-23](#); [Luke 24:44-53](#)

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The Nicene Creed was written around the same time as we begin to see the Feast of the Ascension in the historical record, about 320 AD. Having lived through a couple of centuries expecting that Jesus would return to earth in the next few days, the church began to struggle with how they were going to go on in the world without the expectation that Jesus would be back in their life time. Part of how they figured that out was to write the Nicene Creed.

We're going to read it together; it's number 15 in your hymnal. But before we do, a couple of things to consider. It's very rare for anyone to believe all the elements of any creed all the time. So when the words say "we believe" and then there is something you're not so sure you believe in, well, rest your heart on the "we". Even if you're not so sure today, someone probably is really clear on the part you shaky on and you can repay the favor in some other part of the creed. Or it might become clearer tomorrow. The other point is that everyone here knows what I mean by the Catholic Church, that religious institution headed up by Pope Francis in Rome. But many of us have forgotten that the word "catholic" means "universal". That's why that Roman institution calls itself the "catholic" church. When the Creed talks about believing in the catholic church, it means that we believe in the universal church, of which we and the Roman Catholic church are a part. So let's read the Nicene Creed together; it's number 15 in your hymnal.

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, the maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended to heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets. We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is seen and unseen. And how could we not believe. This is the God of Abraham and Sarah who chose us to be God's people. This is the God of Moses, who led us out of slavery and into the promised land. This is the God of David and Solomon, who showed us how to live as a people united against the world. This is the God of the prophets, who taught us that God is always with us, even when we abandoned the Teachings and the Laws. This is the God who looked at the Scriptures of the Hebrew Bible and did not draw a line under them, close the book, shove it away. This is the God who sent a son to live among us, to teach as a fellow human what it meant to

follow the Call of God, what it meant to live in expectation of the promise of the Kingdom of God.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended to heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end. And how could we not believe. He talked about living out the Scriptures that God had given us. He talked about caring for the hungry, the sick, those in prison. He ate with the outcasts. He healed those discarded by society. He spoke words of non-violence when confronted with ever escalating violence. He confronted the authorities of this world forcing them to acknowledge the danger he posed to the system they relied on.

They killed him and we did nothing to prevent it. They killed him and we hid for three days from the same authorities that we were sure were coming for us. They killed him and only the weakest among us, the most vulnerable, the single women and the widows went to find his body, to give it proper burial. When they came back and told us of how the God we believe in had reached into history and changed its course forever, we did not believe them.

But Jesus had come back to life. To the walking and talking and eating a bit of broiled fish life that we all lived. We saw with our own eyes, felt with our own finger tips, that he lived again, fully human. He never reproached us, never yelled at us for abandoning him. He just spent 40 days teaching us some more. And then he ascended to heaven. We stood there with our eyes raised to the skies, where we had last seen him and we all asked the same question, “Did you have to leave?”

Because, honestly, we all believed better when he was physically with us. In those last weeks he was with us, during the miracle time of Easter, those forty days after the Resurrection, we heard what he said. He said we were to be his witnesses, to the ends of the earth. We are his witnesses, we live our lives so that everyone around us can see our repentance and forgiveness of sins. Or we try to anyway. We just did a better job when he was around. Still, even on our worst days, we are his witnesses, because we belong to him¹, even if we don’t always repent and forgive as readily as we should.

But without him, we have to face these horrible questions from the non-believers around us.² Why should they believe in Jesus if he was rejected by so many leaders in his own community? We have to roll our shoulders and squirm because we know how this is going to sound, but because we’re his witnesses and it’s true, we have to say, “Just because he died a horrible death at the hands of the authorities doesn’t mean he was wrong. It means that he was a threat to a system that allows a powerful few to control the resources of a powerless many. He still is a threat. Believe.”

¹ Wayne Weissenbuehler, “Acts 1:1-11”, *Interpretation* 46, no. 1 (1992): 64

² Clarence DeWitt “Jimmy” Agan III, “History, Revelation, Assurance: Three Perspectives on Luke’s Gospel”, *Presbyterion* 38, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 44-45. Agan identifies the paradoxes, the responses to them are my own.

Others ask us why should they believe when so many of Jesus' followers are "outsiders" while those who seem to be "insiders" turn away? Why should they believe when the Christian message better received among sinners and outcasts? With our stomachs in knots, because we know we are indeed sinners, we know what we have to say. We're his witnesses and it's true. "We are all sinners and we are all saints, all the time. He is offering salvation, but you have to repent and you have to forgive sins, including your own. If you don't even see your own sins, those things you do to pretend that you can bridge the gap between you and God, the gap that only God can cross, then you're going to turn away, thinking you can do it on your own. You can't. Jesus is seated at God's right hand. Jesus will close that gap. Believe."

Still others will say why should they believe when those who do believe endure the greatest humiliation and suffering. Why should they believe when the person we follow died in agony? We know they're right. It's so hard when the people we live with, the people we work with think we're foolish to not take every advantage we can. We clear our throats before we offer our witness and our truth, "We see suffering differently because we follow a man who suffered for us. Because we follow someone who could not possibly have deserved it, we recognize the suffering of others as something we have to respond to. We don't want to suffer. We don't want anyone to suffer. But we're never allowed to pretend that someone else's suffering doesn't matter. Sometimes we don't know what to do about it. But we're not allowed to ignore it. If we all work to reduce suffering, wherever we find it, we will be doing what he asked. Believe."

But the people who understand the most will ask the most devastating question, "How can we believe in a church, with its message from a crucified Messiah, led by weak and inadequate people, and besieged by conflict and persecution? How can such a church ever hope to succeed in bringing its message to the ends of the earth?" There is nothing we can say to that. Our message is from a crucified Messiah, rejected by the leaders of his community and by the powerful in ours. We are all leaders of the church. By living our lives as Christians, by praying in the name of Jesus, by coming to worship on Sunday, we are leaders of the church. And we are entirely weak and inadequate. All around us we see divisions between denominations, between Protestants and Catholics, public disagreements over the smallest of trivial details. We hear people taking actions we see as running completely counter to Jesus' teachings and claiming that they are following their Christian beliefs. We see Christians in other countries being persecuted simply for being Christians. In the first decades after Christ's death, how could such a church hope to succeed? In the first centuries after Christ's death, when the Nicene Creed was written, how could such a church hope to succeed? In the first millennia after Christ's death, in our own day and age, how could such a church hope to succeed?

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets. We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.

When Jesus led us as far as Bethany, we wanted to know if that was when he would restore the Kingdom of God. He told us not to question the timing, but he didn't correct us about what the task at hand was. So we knew what we had to do. As he ascended to heaven, and we asked, almost wistfully, why he had to go, we had our answer. The men in white robes who suddenly

appeared told us to stop witnesses with our eyes. We had to start witnessing in other ways.³ We had to become apostles. We had to start spreading the lessons Jesus taught to the ends of the earth.

Those men in white also made something else clear. Just as surely as Jesus had lived and died, just as surely as Jesus had been resurrected from the dead and ascended to heaven, just as surely as all the miracles we had already witnessed had occurred, Jesus would return.⁴

We can believe in a “holy” church, because “holy” means “set aside” and we have been set aside to witness the actions of God in this world. We can believe in a “catholic” church because “catholic” means “universal” and the message the church bears is universal. We can believe in an “apostolic” church because we are one link in an unbroken chain of apostles that began that day in Bethany, continued through the church in Jerusalem, Antioch, Constantinople and Rome, through the work of the Protestant Reformers and the Puritan New England farmers to us.

So of course we believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church. With all its flaws and frailties, we believe that such a church should expect to succeed in bringing Christ’s message of repentance and forgiveness of sins to the ends of the earth. The reason is sitting right there in the description of that day. Jesus was blessing us as he went to heaven. He never stopped. The end of the blessing, the benediction, the time when we say “Amen”, doesn’t come until he returns.⁵ The blessing may be impossible to find with human eyes and human hearts, but it is still there. The Holy Spirit is still there. Some back pack filled today may give a kid in Nashua just the tiny bit of leverage he needs to get into college. Some conversation over a plate of chicken and veggies may give a senior in Brookline just enough spark to get out of a complicated living situation. The invitation you give a friend to come with you to worship on a day when we’re clapping our hands and singing gospel hymns may open them up just enough to let in a sliver of forgiveness and begin their path to salvation.

We’ll never know. Ascension gives us that as an assurance. We’ll never know for sure what will happen because Christ was born and died, rose from the dead and ascended to heaven. We are still working out how to live with the uncertainty, with the unlikely prospects of the Christian church being able to fulfill Christ’s mission for us. But we will be his witnesses in the world. We will never know what effects our witness has. But we will believe in God, in Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit, in the Church. On that first Ascension day we were invited to live our belief as witnesses, to accept that we would never know for certain, to understand that the challenges to our beliefs would be formidable. But we were also invited to remember that the blessing would never end, that Jesus would return, that we could do what he asked of us. Ascension asks us to believe.

³ Weissenbuehler, p. 64

⁴ Weissenbuehler, p. 64

⁵ Thomas H. Troeger, “Ascension of the Lord, Homiletical Perspective, Luke 24:44-53” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 2*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008], 512.