

FEET FIRMLY PLANTED

I guess I don't need to tell you its Mother's Day. Florists, stationers and a wide array of retailers have been heralding its approach ever since Easter. "Mom's the word," trumpets one department store's ads for everything from perfume to hats. A jeweler, selling a 14KT, two-tone pendant for \$249 urges you to purchase their product for, and I quote, "a mom who is as good as gold." And the folks who bring you the annual Thanksgiving Day parade encourage sons and daughters to "Give more than flowers." (All advertisements from the *New York Times*, 5-6-05)

Some of my colleagues refer to Mother's Day as a Hallmark holiday, one created to sell cards and flowers and 14KT two-tone pendants. But in fact, Mother's Day was founded as a church-based holiday, and the eventual commercialization of this annual tribute to mothers appalled its founder.

Anna Reeves Jarvis died exactly 100 years ago in Grafton, West Virginia. It is said that shortly before her death she and her daughter, also named Anna, had quarreled. Out of a sense of remorse, young Anna vowed at her mother's graveside to act on her mother's long-held dream of a holiday honoring mothers.

Two years after the funeral, Anna went back to Grafton and handed out five hundred carnations at St. Andrew's, her mothers Methodist church. And the next year, on May 10, 1908, St. Andrew's held its first service honoring mothers.

Anna lived in Philadelphia and gained a powerful ally, John Wanamaker, in her crusade to create a national day for mothers. Slowly, the idea began to catch on and in 1909 special Mother's Day services were held in forty-six states. Anna quit her job and took up the effort full-time, championing the cause in any way that she could. In 1912 West Virginia, appropriately, became the first state to officially endorse the maternal holiday. And finally, in 1914, the U.S. Congress passed a resolution, signed by Woodrow Wilson, proclaiming the second Sunday in May as Mother's Day.

Unfortunately it didn't take too long for the day to turn into just another reason for shopping, and Jarvis grew increasingly upset with the commercialization of the day. "I wanted it to be a day of sentiment," she noted, "Not profit." And as for Hallmark and its predecessors, Jarvis thought greeting cards to be, in her words, "a poor excuse for the letter[s] [people] are too lazy to write." ("A History of Mother's Day", www.about.com)

Whether or not you agree with Anna Jarvis about the holiday's commercial side, it is, apparently here to stay. And it is, despite all the profit it may generate, for

most people, a day of to honor and remember their mothers, living or not. In the best sense of the word, a day of sentiment.

No, I don't need to tell you its Mother's Day. But did you know it is also a special day for another reason? Did you know it's Ascension Sunday?

Though widely ignored in Protestant circles, Ascension Day, which was last Thursday, and Ascension Sunday are considered extremely important in many parts of the church. It is the time marking the ascension into heaven of Jesus after he made several resurrection appearances to his followers.

Our lesson from Acts tells the basic story.

After his resurrection on the first Easter Jesus encountered his followers several times. Then, forty days after the resurrection, his followers are all together, just outside of Jerusalem. The time they have spent with the Risen Christ has apparently re-energized the disciples. And it has renewed their hopes that Jesus is going to retake Jerusalem from the Romans and rule over the nation.

"Lord," one of them asks, "is this the time you are going to restore the kingdom of Israel?" (Acts 1:6b)

Always slow to learn, the disciples still don't get it. So Jesus lays it out in no uncertain terms. No, he says, my reign isn't about military might or political power. It is about changing hearts and transforming lives. And you Peter, James, you Mary and Joanna, you are all the ones who are going to spread that message. You are the ones who will tell people just how much God loves them and how much God wants them to love one another. You are going to be empowered by my spirit, the Holy Spirit, so that you can carry this good news to the very ends of the earth.

And then, Luke tells us, "he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight." (Acts 1:9b) He ascended into heaven.

Now you see him, now you don't.

How it happened, exactly *what* happened is hard to say. And in some ways unimportant. The truly important thing to note is this: three days after Jesus' crucifixion the disciples had the powerful experience of his presence which we call the resurrection. And then, forty days later, they had the experience of his leaving once again. At a time when it was believed God's eternal home was beyond the sky, it makes sense that they would experience this departure as ascension into heaven.

What I find most striking about this passage, however, is not the ascension itself, but what happens next. For even as the disciples stand gazing into the heavens

with jaws dropped and mouths wide open, they see two angels. Angels who remind them of the need to focus on their mission.

“Men of Galilee,” the angels ask, “Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” (1:11) Don’t worry, they say, this Jesus will return. You can take comfort in that knowledge. You can be heavenly minded if you wish—but you must also be of some earthly good. It’s OK for your heads to be in the clouds for a time—but far more important for your feet to be firmly planted on earth. For there is much work to be done in Jesus’ name. And so the disciples return to Jerusalem and wait for the Spirit. And, ten days later, when the Holy Spirit shows up in full power, they begin the work of sharing the love of God throughout the world.

Jesus had given them three years of solid example, solid teaching, solid inspiration. Their time with Jesus had given them roots. And so we too must be rooted in Christ’s love and Christ’s teaching. As St. Paul later tells the Colossians: “Plant your roots in Christ and let him be the foundation for your life. Be strong in your faith, just as you were taught.” (Colossians 2:6-7a, *CEV*)

Yes, they were rooted in Christ, but now it was time for them to move out. Now it was time for them to take wings and fly.

And it is at this point that this story from Acts is most instructive. For it is here that we find the fortunate convergence of the ancient Feast of the Ascension and the modern celebration of Mother’s Day. For in his work on earth and in his ascension into heaven, in his time with the disciples, and in his leaving them so that they might go about their work, Jesus was much like . . . a good mother. Hodding Carter puts it well: “There are only two lasting bequests we can hope to give our children. One of these is roots, the other is wings.”

And therein lies the challenge. For Christian mothers (and fathers as well) must forever remember that like Jesus they must spend copious amounts of time teaching their children, in word and deed, what it means to love God and serve our neighbors. It takes a lot of effort to instill such values. But that’s what it means to give a child roots. Deep, nourishing roots.

But the time also comes, just as it did for Jesus with his disciples, when parents must draw back, and give their children the space they need to use their wings.

Roots and wings.

Kay Chernnowski understood that. A deeply devout woman, she reared her daughter in the Ukrainian Orthodox tradition. Kay was a fine elementary school teacher, but her most important teaching may have been that which was done at home. For there she taught her daughter how to love and how to be a caring human being. She gave her roots which go very deep.

And when her daughter took flight and tried out her wings, Kay allowed her to find her own way, even when it meant leaving her home, her country and her childhood denomination.

Not too long ago Kay died. And her daughter grieved mightily. To this day she keeps a picture of Kay in a locket she wears all the time.

Today Kay's daughter is a mother herself. And along with her husband, she is giving *their* daughter the gift of roots. Not only that, recently she has added a new responsibility.

Four months ago, when a baby boy named Nick was born, his own mother was unable to care for him. She had her own issues to sort out, her own troubles to deal with—someone else would need to care for Nick. Kay's daughter and her husband agreed to provide a foster home for the infant. But then, one of Nick's relatives volunteered to give him a home. And that seemed to be for the best. But a couple of weeks ago that fell through, and now Nick is here in Westport.

As Kay's daughter sat with Nick in her arms in my office last week, she asked me to keep him in my prayers. "I don't know how long we'll have him," she said, "But each day we do, we'll give him all the love we can."

Burnie and Barbara Burnett also understood about roots and wings. Literally in Burnie's case. He was a fighter pilot and a Captain in the Navy. Like most military families, the Burnetts moved a great deal. But their daughter grew up knowing she was deeply loved. She grew up learning basic values from her parents. Things like love of God, loyalty to family, respect for elders, honesty, trust and courage. Good roots—deep roots.

And when Burnie and Barbara's daughter grew up she too was granted wings. Wings that carried her into a career, a new denomination, and time across the country.

A while back, Burnie took ill and his daughter made frequent and long trips back home to help him through his last months. She just needed to spend a bit more time with the old fighter pilot.

Burnie's daughter has two sons that she and her husband love more than one can say. So when she discovered she was pregnant, she secretly hoped for a girl, for a bit of balance. Shortly before his death, though, Burnie put his hand on his daughter's swelling belly and told her it was a boy.

Burnie wasn't often wrong—but this time he was. For over a week ago his daughter had a baby girl, Tessa Grace. But though Burnie was wrong about her

gender, he was very right about so many things. Things that empower his daughter to this day. Things that she will pass on to her sons and her daughter.

The day after Tessa Grace was born I visited Burnie's daughter in the hospital. She was surrounded by her mother, her two sons and her husband. And her new little girl.

"Would you like to hold her?" I was asked.

I never say no to holding a baby!

And as I cradled her in my arms, Burnie's daughter asked if I would pray for Tessa Grace, if I'd ask God's blessing on this newest member of the family.

You see, Burnie's daughter also understands about roots. And I know she and her husband will do all they can to give their new daughter roots to last a lifetime. And when the moment is right, wings as well.

No, I don't need to tell you its Mother's Day. Hallmark has taken care of that. But Ascension Sunday may be another matter. So I hope the story of the Ascension has helped. I hope it has helped you remember the importance of roots and wings. For just as Jesus provided both to his disciples, so he calls us all, as parents, as grandparents, as aunts and uncles, as concerned adults, to do the same for the children in our care, the children in our midst.

Just like Kay and Burnie did for their daughters.

You know them both, by the way. They are two of our church school teachers, Kim Mathias and Michelle Weir. I thank them both for allowing me to share their stories. More importantly, I thank them for helping us understand the importance of roots and wings.

**Amen
John H. Danner**