

WHERE IS JESUS? ASCENSION SUNDAY

(05/05/2024)

Scripture Lesson: Acts 1:1-14
Luke 24:44-53

“When he [Jesus] had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.” (Acts 1:9)

Today is the sixth Sunday of the Easter season. The fifty days between Easter and Pentecost is a special time in our church year. It is a time that we set aside to reflect on what happened to Jesus following his crucifixion. On Easter Sunday, we focus our attention on the miracle of Jesus’ resurrection, on the empty tomb, the cornerstone of our faith. In the seven weeks that follow, we focus on the post-resurrection encounters, the disciples’ experiences of meeting their risen Lord in several different places, ways, and even forms.

We do this throughout the Easter season not only to help us understand what the disciples experienced following Jesus’ death and resurrection, but also to help us understand the existential themes of death, life after death, and heaven as they apply to us and to our loved ones who have passed on, loved ones whom we might mistakenly believe are no longer with us.

One question that arises from the disciples’ descriptions of their experiences of the risen Lord by the tomb, in the upper room, by the side of the lake, and on the road to Emmaus is whether Jesus was in what we would call “heaven” when the disciples encountered him.

It seems to me that the point might be not whether *Jesus* was in heaven at the time of these encounters, but whether *the disciples* were in heaven or in the kingdom of God when they suddenly realized that they were in the presence of their risen Lord. As I suggested a few weeks ago, the disciples may have been able to see, hear, and even touch Jesus because they were able to see deeper, because they could tap into the dimension or realm of heaven, of eternity, the realm from which Jesus came and where he always is. I believe that this realm, which we usually think of as distant, as above us, is actually closer to us than we might think!

Three of the four gospels conclude with a description of how Jesus left his disciples, and two of the gospels describe how he ascended to heaven. These two state that he actually went up into the air. Since this coming Thursday, May 9, is Ascension Day, and since we aren’t planning to do it up big this year as a church, I thought we might take a few minutes this morning to explore this important doctrine.

Actually, when I asked several church people what they thought we might do to observe or celebrate Ascension Day, they all suggested that we have a potluck supper! It’s beginning to dawn on me that no matter what special holy day I ask about, the answer is always the same—

let's have a potluck supper! I think that tells us something about our church—not only their level of theological sophistication, but also the parts of church life, of church fellowship that they really enjoy! But that's not the point.

We should begin by noting that the three synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke are not in total agreement with regard to the ascension, and the ascension is not mentioned at all in the fourth gospel, the Gospel of John.

The Gospel of Mark has two endings, both of which were obviously added to the original gospel after it had been written. These two endings have been designated by biblical scholars as the shorter and the longer endings. Their names, as you might guess, are appropriate; one of the endings is, indeed, shorter than the other. The shorter ending in Mark makes no mention of Jesus' ascension. In fact, there is no mention of any post-resurrection meetings or encounters with his disciples. A young man, presumably an angel, appears to the women and directs them to tell the disciples that Jesus is going before them to Galilee and that they will see him there. The shorter ending, which was added later, concludes with the following:

And afterward Jesus himself sent out through them [the disciples], from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation.

The so-called longer ending, which isn't really long but is longer than the shorter ending, contains a description of the ascension. In it we read,

Then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them [the disciples}, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it.

So, according to these two endings, Jesus is both in heaven, seated at the right hand of God, and he is also here on earth, working with the disciples and confirming their proclamation of the Kingdom of God by miracles and signs. He is both distant and present, both transcendent and immanent.

In the Gospel of Matthew there is no mention of Jesus' ascension. Following his resurrection when Jesus meets the disciples on a mountain in Galilee, he says to them,

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

Note that Jesus does not leave his disciples whom, according to one of the other gospels, he now refers to as his brothers and his friends. He does not ascend or go to heaven. Rather, he simply promises to be with them always, even to the end of the age.

The passage we heard this morning from the Gospel of Luke contains a description of the ascension. It says,

Then Jesus led his disciples out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.

This passage suggests that Jesus “withdrew” from the disciples into heaven. There is no promise that he will continue to be with them, only that they will be “clothed with power from on high,” which I take to mean that they will receive the Holy Spirit.

These accounts, though they differ, suggest that following his resurrection Jesus is both transcendent, separate from us, dwelling in a place we might call heaven, and also immanent, with us, right here on earth, closer to us than we are to ourselves. The disciples realize that although Jesus left them, he did not leave them. Although Jesus is in heaven with God, he is also here on earth.

There are five parts to the Easter story. The first is Jesus’ crucifixion. The second is the resurrection, what happened to Jesus’ spirit and body the night following his burial. The third is the post-resurrection experiences, the disciples’ encounters with the risen Christ at the tomb, in the upper room, by the lake, and on the road to Emmaus.

Jesus’ ascension, his departure from earth and entry into heaven, is the fourth part. The doctrine of the ascension is included in the Apostles’ Creed. According to the book of Acts, this event happened forty days after Easter. As we know, the number forty is significant; it appears time and again in scripture as a numerical symbol of wholeness. In Acts and the gospel of Luke, which were written by the same author, the ascension marks the end of the post-resurrection experiences.

In some of his post-resurrection encounters, Jesus appears in human form. He allows Thomas to touch the nail holes in his hands and the spear wound in his side. He breaks bread with two disciples after they travel together on the road to Emmaus, and he eats breakfast with seven others beside the Sea of Tiberias.

In other post-resurrection encounters, Jesus seems to be more spirit than flesh. He appears in the midst of the disciples even though the doors of the room are closed and locked. He vanishes from their midst following their recognition of him in the upper room, on the road to

Emmaus, and by the lake. In his encounter with Mary by the tomb, Jesus asks her not to touch him since he has “not yet ascended to the Father.” This implies that Mary could have touched him but, for some reason, she should not.

As we think about our loved ones who have passed away, we do so in light of our belief in the power of the resurrection. We know that our loved ones are alive in our hearts and in our memories. We trust that they are alive in some way in the presence of God. However, the disciples’ experience of Jesus after he died may suggest that, like Jesus, our loved ones may also be with us as a living presence, a presence that can only be sensed through the connecting power of love.

In the account of the ascension in the book of Acts, Jesus goes up into the air. Luke tells us he was “lifted up” or “carried up” into heaven. I’m not sure we have to take the expression “up” literally, though some of us instinctively raise our eyes when we pray.

In Jesus’ time, when people believed in a flat earth and a three-storied universe, they pictured heaven up in the sky and hell under the ground. Note that the two men in white robes who suddenly appear beside the disciples at the tomb ask them, “Why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” They seem to be telling the disciples not to look for Jesus in heaven; he is right here on earth both within and among you. The emphasis is more on his immanence than his transcendence.

With regard to this morning’s gospel reading, the footnote in our Bible indicates that there were two different descriptions of the ascension in the ancient texts. In one, Jesus simply parts, departs, or withdraws from his disciples. In the other, he departs from them and rises up to heaven. The first implies that he just separates himself from his disciples. The second implies that he ascends to heaven. So, which was it? And where is heaven, anyway?

I think our language may be the problem. When human beings became conscious, they began to split their experience of the world into opposites: up and down, right and left, light and dark, good and bad, male and female, God and humanity, heaven and earth, life and death. This is how our mind and our language structure reality, but it may not be how reality is. Reality may not be separated into the neat little categories that our language, our description of reality, implies.

Think of the dichotomy of mind and body. We think of them as separate and distinct, but are they? We can’t have mind without body. If we maintain their separate existence, we create a conundrum—to solve the problem of communication between the two separate and different entities, we try to collapse them into one. So, Christian Scientists maintain that mind is the only

reality, physical matter is an illusion, and prayer is the only effective response to illness. Materialists, on the other hand, believe that everything is reducible to body, that the mind is nothing more than the brain. Their approach to healing is anatomical/chemical/neurological. They do not believe in psychosomatic medicine, though we know from our own experience that stress can give rise to an ulcer or headache, and that a chemical imbalance in our body or brain, e.g., through drinking alcoholic beverages or taking drugs, can affect our mind.

I know that you're not surprised that I like the solution to this paradox suggested by Buddhism and Taoism. When it comes to the relationship of mind and body, Shunryu Suzuki, in his book *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, suggests that, as he puts it, "They are not two, and they are not one. If you think they are two, you are incorrect. If you think they are one, you are also incorrect. They are both two and one." I like this! It brings us back to the importance of paradox in our beliefs.

When we dichotomize, we invariably place a value judgment on the polarities. The belief that spirit is good and that flesh is bad led to asceticism, the denigration of the body as a path to spiritual enlightenment. The belief that heaven is good and that earth is bad, evil, and fallen has kept us from embracing the wonder of God's creation and lovingly caring for it.

When Jesus ascends to heaven, it is possible that he doesn't go to a place. Through his ascension he ushers us into a different reality or a different grasp of reality. As we know from the post-resurrection appearances, the disciples experience him as both spirit and flesh. He can walk through walls, yet he eats fish. He is in heaven, yet he is on earth with us. He is no longer present, except to those who love him. To these people, his disciples, he is very present! I think we could say that, in relation to the two sides of his nature, the human and the divine, they are not two, not one.

I believe that Jesus overcomes death by dissolving the dichotomy between life and death, earth and heaven, this side of the grave and the other. This is why I find it sad when I hear some people say that they can't wait until they die so they can be with God. I believe that when we die, we will be in heaven with God. It is also possible that we are with God right now because heaven is right here on earth, though we may not know it!

You may remember the popular ballad, "God is Watching Us from a Distance." When I first heard the song, I liked its message. It reminds us that if we look at things from a distant perspective, the boundaries and distinctions that divide peoples and nations do not appear.

However, there is one part of this song that troubles me. It is the suggestion that God is watching us--from a distance. It pictures God as a detached observer, apart from the world, the universe that God created or into which God incarnated or emanated. The message of the gospel

is that God is present with us and within us. The image of God dwelling billions of miles from earth and shaking his head in disapproval at what we are doing to each other, is not the way I picture God or God's presence in the unfolding of our lives.

The ascension, like the virgin birth, which is also mentioned in the Apostles' Creed, may very well have happened literally. Like the virgin birth, the ascension may also be a symbolic expression of a deeper truth. This would explain why the accounts are so paradoxical. The deeper message of the virgin birth is that Jesus is both human and divine. The deeper meaning of the ascension is that Jesus is both in heaven and here on earth. He is distant, yet present. He is with God and with us. This means that we are with him and with God.

The great cathedrals of Europe were built in a period when most of the people who attended church were illiterate. Those who constructed these massive edifices took great pains to teach the faith through art. If you walked through Notre Dame in Paris before the fire, you would have found the entire story of Jesus' life depicted in sculpture and painting. Even if you couldn't read, you could connect the scripture readings you heard on Sunday morning with the pictures. This experience would imprint the teaching in your mind in a powerful visual way.

The cathedral in York, England contains an interesting painting. In one of the side chapels, an unknown craftsman created a testimony to the ascension. On the ceiling at the top of the archway is a painting showing eleven faces gathered in a circle. They are the twelve disciples, minus Judas Iscariot, who are with Jesus as he departs into heaven. At the very center of the painting is a pair of feet—which is all that the disciples would have seen as Jesus is lifted up or ascends to heaven.

Is this literally the way it happened—that Jesus simply rose into the air and faded away into the clouds? Or was this an attempt to depict a deeper truth about heaven and earth, this life and the next, in a picture? No matter what you believe, there is no doubt that the disciples experienced Jesus as both in heaven and on earth, as what we might call a distant presence.

For those of us who have lost loved ones, let us think of our loved ones who have died as living on not only in our memories but also in the mysterious realm of God. Let us consider the possibility that they are still alive, just in another realm, like a parallel universe, and that they can be present to us in a very real way, just as Jesus was to his disciples. Let us consider the possibility that heaven is not distant from us, that heaven is within us, that this mysterious and sacred realm is nearer to us than we are to ourselves.

My prayer for us is that in relation to our Lord and our loved ones who have passed away, we, like the disciples, will experience the message of the ascension--the deeply comforting sense

that they are both in heaven and also with us, that they will be with us always, even to the end of the age.

A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson

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(An audio version of this sermon will be posted on our church website later this week.)