

WHERE IS JESUS? ASCENSION SUNDAY

(05/14/2023)

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

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

“And He departed from our sight that we might return to our heart, and there find Him. For He departed and behold, He is here.” (St. Augustine)

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 his resurrection, on the empty tomb. 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 and even forms.

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, or 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! A third option, of course, is that *both* Jesus and the disciples were in heaven, in the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God together!

The scriptural accounts of the post-resurrection encounters raise the possibility that the disciples were 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, the dimension or realm of eternity, the realm where Jesus “came from” and where Jesus always is*. I believe that this realm, which we usually think of as distant, either in space (above the clouds, just outside the universe) or time (only experienced after we die), *is closer to us than we might think*.

Three of the four gospels conclude with a description of how Jesus left his disciples, and two gospels, Mark and Luke, describe how he ascended to heaven. These two gospels state that, in the presence of his disciples, Jesus went up into the air. Since this coming Thursday, May 18, is Ascension Day, and since we probably won’t be doing it up big this year as a church, I thought we might take a few minutes this morning to explore this important doctrine, this important event in the life of Jesus and his disciples.

We should begin by noting that the three synoptic gospels are not in total agreement regarding the ascension, and, for some reason, it is not mentioned at all in the Gospel of John. This discrepancy, which did not seem to have bothered the writers/compilers of the gospels and those who selected these four gospels for inclusion into the canon, into the official Bible as we know it, also does not bother me.

The Bible is not a single, coherent book; it is a collection of different kinds of writings: history, poetry, prophecy, religious experience, dreams, symbolism, teachings, moral guidelines, etc., by many different authors. It is a complex weaving of documents that circumambulate around a central theme that spanned several thousand years of human history, a record of people's experiences of one specific revelation or experience of God, one specific revelation, one specific experience of the overarching (or underlying) archetype of Divinity. Since the people who contributed to our Bible lived in a culture that is quite different from ours, it is foolish (*and can be harmful or even evil*) to apply biblical passages or teachings in a literalistic way to the incredibly complex and rapidly evolving personal and social problems of our time.

The Gospel of Mark has two endings. Mark apparently didn't know which of the endings was the more authentic, so he decided to include both in his gospel, and he cleverly named them the shorter and the longer endings. The shorter ending not only makes no mention of Jesus' ascension; there is no mention of any post-resurrection meetings of Jesus and his disciples. A young man, presumably an angel, tells the women to tell the disciples that Jesus is going before them to Galilee and that they will see him there. The shorter ending concludes with the following statement:

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 of Mark contains a description of the ascension. In the longer ending we read,

So, 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 [the disciples] went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it.

The longer ending implies that Jesus is *both* in heaven, seated at the right hand of God, and also here on earth, working *with* the disciples and confirming their proclamation of the Kingdom of God by miracles and healings. I'm sure that is how the disciples experienced it. They experienced Jesus, the risen Christ, as *both* in heaven *and* on earth, as both distant and present, as both transcendent and immanent.

In the Gospel of Matthew there is no mention of Jesus' ascension. Following his resurrection, when he meets the disciples on a mountain in Galilee, Jesus 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 in Matthew's account, Jesus does not leave the disciples. He does not ascend or go to heaven. Rather *he 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 and was "carried up" into heaven. In Luke, 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 gifts that accompany the presence of the Holy Spirit.

These accounts 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 really leave them. *In their experience*, although Jesus is in heaven with God, he is also here on earth. So, where is Jesus?!

There are five parts to the Easter story. The first is Jesus' crucifixion. The second is his resurrection. The third is 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 dimension. According to the book of Acts, the ascension happened forty days after Easter. The number forty is archetypal; it is a symbol of wholeness or completeness. In the book of 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 invites 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 where they are meeting are closed and locked. He suddenly 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 (which I tried to explain last week), 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. This is what the apostle Paul means when he tells us that “we should not grieve as those do who have no faith.” We know our loved ones are alive in our hearts and in our memories. We trust they are alive in some way in the presence of God. However, the disciples’ experience of Jesus after he died leads us to believe 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 descriptive “up” literally. In Jesus’ time, people believed in a flat earth and a three-storied universe with heaven up in the sky and hell under the ground. It is interesting that the two men in white robes ask the disciples, “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.” Apparently, we don’t have to look up to see Jesus. *We just have to look around!*

There are two different descriptions of the ascension in the Bible. In one, Jesus simply 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?

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, God and humanity, male and female, 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 bifurcated categories that our language, our description of reality, would lead us to believe. For instance, we have recently come to discover that not only sexual orientation, but also gender and gender identity are not binary, as we once thought; they are fluid.

When we dichotomize, we invariably place a value judgment on the polarities. The belief that spirit is good and flesh is bad led to asceticism, the denigration of the body as a path to spiritual enlightenment. To illustrate this point, let me read a short piece published two weeks ago by the Associated Press.

Thirty-nine bodies have been found so far on land owned by a pastor in coastal Kenya who was arrested for telling his followers to fast to death.

Malindi sub-county police chief John Kemboi said that additional shallow graves have yet to be dug up on the land belonging to pastor Paul Makenzi, who was arrested on April 14 over links to cultism.

The total death toll is 43, because a four additional people died after they and others were discovered starving at the Good News International Church last week.

Police have asked a court to allow them to hold Makenzi longer as investigations continue. A tipoff from members of the public led police to raid the pastor's property in Malindi, where they found 15 emaciated people, including the four who later died. The followers said they were starving on the pastor's instructions in order to meet Jesus.

Police had been told there were dozens of shallow graves spread across Makenzi's farm and digging started on Friday.

I don't think Jesus is happy with this ascetic version of what it means to be a disciple of the Way, the Way to Jesus and God. It just causes unnecessary suffering and death. Jesus does not want us to do anything that hurts us or others. But this is what happens when we dichotomize!

The belief that heaven is good, and that earth is consequently bad, evil, and fallen, has kept us from embracing and caring for the wonder of God's creation. This has led to the desecration, the de-sacralizing, the destruction of our environment. It is the same with the dichotomy of sacred and secular. It leads to the belief that only some places are holy. But where are the places that are not holy? Elizabeth Barrett Browning tells us, "Earth's crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God: but only those who see take off their shoes."

Jesus 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!

In our creeds, we affirm that Jesus defeated the powers of death. I believe that Jesus overcame death and helps us overcome our fear of 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 do believe that when we die, we will be in "heaven" with God. I also believe that we are in heaven with God right now because heaven is right here on earth, though we may not know it!

The ascension, like the virgin birth, both of which are mentioned in the Apostles' Creed, may have happened literally. It's possible. Like the virgin birth, however, the ascension may also be a symbolic expression of a deeper truth. This would explain why the accounts of each in scripture 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 he is with us. This means that we are with him, and we are with God. I think this is how a mystic like Meister Eckhart would see it.

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 clockwise through the area behind the main altar at Notre Dame in Paris, before it was devastated by fire, you would find the story of Jesus' life depicted in sculpture and painting. Even if you couldn't read, you could connect the scripture readings you heard when you attended mass with the pictures. This would imprint these teachings as images in your mind.

In one of the side chapels of the cathedral in York, England, 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--all that would be seen by the disciples as Jesus ascends to heaven.

Is this *literally* the way it happened--that Jesus simply rose into the air and faded away into the clouds? Perhaps. 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, the disciples apparently experienced Jesus as both in heaven and on earth. And this is also possible for us!

St. Augustine said it best: "*And He departed from our sight that we might return to our heart and there find Him. For He departed and behold, He is here.*" Augustine is telling us that Jesus is in our heart! If we are looking for Jesus, that is where we should look!

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 (perhaps 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, as Augustine implies, we can find our loved ones, just like we can find Jesus, *in our heart!*

My prayer for us is that in relation to both 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 of a special presence. My prayer is also that when we feel we have lost touch with Jesus, we will begin our search within our heart.

*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.