

⁹When He had said this, as they were watching, He was lifted up, and a cloud took Him out of their sight.

¹⁰While He was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them.

¹¹They said, "Men of Galilee, 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."

(Acts 1:9-11, a portion of the First Reading for The Ascension of Our Lord)

²⁰God put this power to work in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places,

²¹far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come.

²²And He has put all things under His feet and has made Him the head over all things for the church,

²³which is His body, the fullness of Him Who fills all in all.

(Ephesians 1:20-23, a portion of the Second Reading for The Ascension)

Dear Friends,

Tomorrow is the feast Day of The Ascension of Our Lord. Since the church considers this one of the six major festivals of the year (along with Christmas, The Epiphany of Our Lord, Easter, Pentecost, and The Holy Trinity) it has long been my practice to move its celebration to the Seventh Sunday of Easter. Thus this reflection will deal with the meaning and promise of The Ascension as seen through the snippets of these lections for the Day.

Unfortunately The Ascension is probably the most misunderstood and mis-interpreted of these six feast Days. Part of that may be due to the fact that it is the only one we commemorate in which Jesus *leaves* us instead of coming to us and revealing Himself to us in some way (in His birth at Bethlehem; through the visit of the Magi; from the grave; through the outpouring of the Spirit; and as Father, Son, and Spirit, respectively).

Not helping matters is much of the religious art that depicts The Ascension. In many paintings and pictures Jesus either levitates on a cloud with His arms upraised and eyes lifted as He prepares to "blast off" to heaven or all that is seen is the soles of His feet dangling at the top of the picture as the disciples confusedly look on. Such imagery seems encouraged by our texts, particularly the portion from Acts 1 above. A closer examination will prove fruitful in putting aside what Martin Luther called, "childish ideas" of a literalistic interpretation of Luke's account.

As we have noted in previous reflections, the simplest way to explain the Ascension is that after the Resurrection Jesus appeared to His disciples to show Himself alive to them. How often and for how long is not consistently reported. Our text from Acts 1 says that "for forty days" Jesus revealed Himself to the disciples and "spoke about the Kingdom of God." In Luke's Gospel account Jesus appears only once to the disciples on Easter evening before "withdrawing" from them just outside of Jerusalem in Bethany. There is no way to reconcile this huge discrepancy.

But the point is that no matter how many times Jesus appeared to them there was a *last* appearance, after which they no longer physically saw Him. That last time was the Ascension. So in one way the Day may be defined in simple chronological terms. But that does not help to mine the powerful promise of the event.

Up until the Resurrection Jesus was limited, as we are, to being in one place at one time. In the Incarnation He set aside His divine power to be omnipresent. But having burst the boundaries of the greatest enemy of creation—death—on Easter, Jesus now is no longer bound by the limits of space and time. To ascend to "the right hand of the Father" as we confess each week in the Creed is to say that now where God is Jesus is found as well. Since God is everywhere that means so is Jesus. As theologian Frederick Niedner has put it, Jesus "leaves *one* time and place to be Lord of *all* times and places."

Thus to think of Jesus ascending into "heaven" does *not* mean that He is located in some place removed from us here on earth. Just as Jesus shattered the bounds between life and death so He has now reconciled "heaven" and "earth," creatures seen and unseen. He is, in the stirring words of Ephesians, "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come."

But that elevated status does *not* remove Him from the messiness of what happens here among us. Rather, God is now “put(ting) [His great power] to work” in *us*, “the church, which is the body of Christ, the fullness of Him Who fills all in all.” Jesus is the bond that holds “heaven” and “earth” together. God’s “power” is “at work” to bring the reality of “heaven” to the messiness of “earth.” Ascension has nothing to do with Jesus leaving us on our own until He comes again. It has to do with bringing the wholeness and blessing of God’s reign—complete and unchallenged now in “heaven”—to bear upon our life here on earth. God’s future is inexorably moving toward us, pulling us into its “fullness.” And the Good News of the Ascension is that this work is fully in the hands of Jesus.

What *makes* that Good News is the way in which Jesus was “taken up into heaven.” Again, Frederick Niedner is insightfully instructive. A—perhaps *the*—turning point in Luke’s Gospel occurs at 9:51. Jesus has just come down from the mount of Transfiguration. There He had spoken with Moses and Elijah about, literally, His “exodus” to Jerusalem. Once down the mountain, Luke says that “when the days drew near for Him to be *taken up*, He set His face toward Jerusalem” and the rejection, suffering, and death He knows awaits Him there. (emphasis added)

The term “taken up” there is the same verb found here in Acts. At its root it means to “raise up,” as in being “raised from the dead.” As Niedner points out, everything Jesus does from that point on in chapter 9 in Luke is part of being “taken up into heaven.” And what are the things He does? He forgives sinners and welcomes outcasts and heals the sick and cares for the women of Jerusalem who weep for Him on the way to Golgotha and prays for forgiveness for His murderers.

For Luke, to be “taken up” means to spend yourself caring for others. It is daily “taking up the cross” and bearing others’ burdens, hurts, and suffering. Therefore, the “way in which this Jesus will come in the same way as you saw Him go into (‘be taken up into’) heaven” is through His followers—the Church—“the body of Christ” to spend themselves in the same way as did Jesus. The “way” in which we and the world “sees” Jesus is in the compassionate, self-giving acts of His “body” which now “fills all in all.”

The Ascension is not levitation on Jesus’ part into the stratosphere. His promised return will not be a reverse descent from “heaven.” We will indeed see Him one Day in all His glory—God “with no masks” in the words of C.S. Lewis. And while His coming may indeed be heralded by “the last trumpet” (1 Corinthians 15) Luke leads us to believe that it will be as unremarkable as His first coming—to an animal feed trough—throughout peasant and fishing villages—to “the Place of the Skull” and unknown on the road to Emmaus.

But in the meantime we get glimpses—flashes of recognition—in “the body.” When His followers forgive instead of take vengeance. When “those who have two coats share with those who have none” and their food with the hungry (Luke 3). When His followers “*daily* take up the cross”—bear the burdens—suffer the loss—act with God’s own mercy and compassion with the lost and hurting, the sick and outcast.

Niedner says that a typical week is a playing out of The Ascension. Even with all our faults and failings God uses us to “take up” the world into His embrace. So finally The Ascension is not something that happened only to Jesus long ago in Jerusalem (or Bethany, depending on which account you follow—Acts 1 or Luke 24). It happens to *us*. Every day.

As you prepare to celebrate this feast day:

- In what ways do you still “stand gazing up into heaven” looking for Jesus’ presence in your life and world?
- How are you aware of God’s “great power” being “put to work” in you and for you and *through* you to “fill all things” with the presence of Christ?

“He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father.” From that past event is hope for our present and promise for the future.

Important Reminders:

Our annual breakfast honoring high school graduates will take place this Sunday, June 5 at 9:15 in the St. Paul Room.

Graduation for our school 8th graders will be this Sunday at 5:00 p.m. in the nave. All are invited to wish our graduates well.

Five of our junior high or high school students have expressed an interest in attending the ELCA National Youth Gathering in New Orleans next summer. As discussed at the congregational meeting on Sunday we as a congregation want to support their efforts to raise enough money to go. Watch for opportunities to help in that effort.

Bob and Virginia Murray and I will be in Ft. Wayne this weekend for the synod assembly. I will leave mid-morning on Friday and return in time for the Saturday evening worship service. If a pastoral emergency occurs please contact the church office.

This will be the last “Markings” until fall. I need a break. They will resume after school begins sometime in mid-September.

Finally, “God has gone up with a shout, the LORD with the sound of the ram’s horn. Sing praise to God, sing praises; sing praises to our King, sing praises.” (Psalm 47:5-6, the appointed Psalm for The Ascension) May your words and actions this day be a song of praise to our King Who in Jesus “fills all things” and rules heaven and earth.

Until next fall,
Yours in Christ,

Pastor Mark Reshan