

Finding Meaning in 'The Ascension'

Acts 1:1-11 Luke 24:44-53
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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June 5, 2011

If you think the story of the Resurrection, and stories of Jesus' appearances to the disciples after his resurrection are hard to explain to modern progressive Christians, then just what do you think we ought to do with the story of Jesus' ascension into heaven?

I could have entitled this sermon, "You can't keep a good man down," and just leave it at that. Or, I could have simply ignored the story altogether, as I have for the past twelve years, which is the last time I preached on the Ascension. Or, I could talk about how we needn't pay any attention to it in the first place, for after all, those of us who consider ourselves people of modern science know that there's nothing above us to ascend to except sky and infinite space. After all, we no longer believe in a three-tiered universe with heaven above, hell beneath, and earth sandwiched in the middle. The visual image of Jesus just disappearing off into the sky, as he does in so many paintings of this story, just doesn't make any logical, rational sense.

Any of those approached, however, would simply be the easy way out. Instead, I think we should do what should be done with each and every biblical story: delve into what the biblical author, and subsequent theologians, think this story adds to the Christian narrative; to see if we can discern the essential purpose of what a story is trying to reveal. As it turns out, **this story of the ascension does indeed serve to function in a much more profound way than just what to do with the resurrected body of Jesus.**

Let's start with the obvious. Again, when it comes to any kind of literal historical accuracy, the Ascension is endlessly problematic. **The biblical author Luke, who wrote both the Gospel of Luke and the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, has two different versions of the same story, especially when it comes to when the Ascension actually occurred in relationship to the Day of Resurrection.**

As we heard in today's gospel reading from the very last chapter of the Gospel of Luke, the author states, "And Jesus led them 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." That's it. One sentence. Jesus blessed them and then left to go to heaven. This occurs by the way, according to this gospel narrative, on the **same day of the resurrection itself** – on Easter Sunday.

But then Luke begins his second volume, the Book of Acts, by saying that Jesus appeared to the disciples over a period of **forty days after his resurrection.**

So which is it? Biblical literalists have a conniption with this – especially since the two obviously different versions of events come from the same author.

If nothing else, that should indicate to us that timing itself isn't meant to be taken literally, because I highly doubt that Luke forgot what he had already written in his gospel when he began to write the Book of Acts. Rather, as one biblical commentator puts it, "Luke was an artist, not a newspaper reporter."

It is certain, however, that Luke uses the event of Jesus' ascension into heaven as a way to act as the bridge between his two books. **The ascension serves to close the**

book concerning the life and ministry of Jesus (the Gospel of Luke) and open the book concerning the life and ministry of the church (the Book of Acts). So instead of endless worry or trying to finagle how to reconcile the variances in Luke's two accounts, let's simply focus on what the story of the Ascension might have meant to the early Christian community, and what it can mean for us today.

Of primary importance to Luke is how the Christian Church came into being and how it was able to grow and thrive when their guide and teacher, Jesus, was no longer present to lead them. So in essence, the primary purpose of this narrative is much more a church question than it is a Jesus question. The larger story is that this fearful, waiting community, which is anxious and bewildered, and feels like it has no power of its own now that its leader is long gone, soon becomes filled with the energy, courage, imagination, and resources needed to further the mission and ministry of Jesus.

Luke is trying to explain how the empowering presence of Jesus will now be experienced in a different way – from his physical presence with them, to the divine presence of God within them. In other words, although Jesus is taken from their sight, he is not really absent at all.

The story of the Ascension, then, functions as a prelude to the sending of the Holy Spirit, thereby marking a transition point from Easter to Pentecost, which we will celebrate next Sunday. Acts 1, therefore, is less interested in what is happening to Jesus than in what is about to happen in the lives of the earliest Christians.

So in the New Testament perspective, **Ascension is an interim time**, a period - not unlike Advent - between promise and fulfillment. The immediate task of Jesus' disciples, therefore, is to **wait for the outpouring of the Spirit**. During this time of waiting, however, they were given an assignment. They weren't to sit idly doing nothing. They were told to **pray**. Prayer is especially important in the "in-between" times of life!

Twentieth-century theologian Karl Barth designated this time between Ascension and Pentecost as a "significant pause" in which the church's task is to wait and to pray. That instruction is often difficult for us activist types to follow.

While I firmly believe that the church was called into being in order to act and be involved in furthering the ministries begun by Jesus, I also believe that our actions must be firmly grounded in discerning God's purpose for this particular congregation.

Biblically, the story of the Ascension functioned as the time when the disciples became apostles – the transition from simply being followers of Jesus to those who were sent out to do the work of Jesus. Writes biblical commentator Frank Logue, "On that day, Jesus' followers were given what they needed to begin to change their focus." That has direct relevance for us as a congregation.

What would it take for us to change our focus? Given that College Hill, in my opinion, already has remarkably good focus, then perhaps the question for us is **what can we do to make sure our vision stays in focus?** So yes I'll say it again, that is a primary reason why we have begun the process of discernment through the work currently being undertaken by our **Visioning Ministry Team**. It is kind of like our time between ascension and Pentecost – a time to pray and wait for guidance and the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit – for the empowerment to step out in ministry.

This morning we recognized the receiving of new members into this community of faith. But "the word "member" should probably not even be used to describe aligning oneself with a given congregation. Logue continues, "We are not to be members of a club, exclusive or otherwise, as if Jesus' ministry were only for the purpose

of starting a new institution. The institution of the church exists to further God's mission – reconciling the world to God “and to one another.”

So instead of calling ourselves “members” of this congregation, a better and truer term is that we are “missionaries” of this congregation, working on the front lines of the mission of the church.

This need to transition from focusing inward to turning outward is so crucial. Acts 1:10-11 states, “While Jesus was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven?’” In others words, **there is a time to stop looking up and start looking out, for there is important work to be done out in a hurting world.**

As you may be aware, the term “apostle” itself comes from the Greek verb “to send.” **An apostle, then, is simply “one who is sent forth.”** That is what we remind ourselves of at the close of each and every service of worship. **After gathering each Sunday for worship – our time to wait and pray – we are sent out (as apostles, no less) to begin our service out in the world.**

True, the first thing most of us do after being sent forth is to grab some lunch, and that's fine. Nourishment and self-care are crucial to good ministry. But we should not leave this service of worship untransformed. **Having experienced the presence of Christ in worship, we should become better at seeing Christ – the presence of God, if you prefer – in others.** This includes seeing Christ in that waiter or waitress at lunch.

This is the transformation of Ascension Day. We come to be renewed, but then leave empowered in order to fulfill our mission anew. **The story of the Ascension, then, is meant to help us to turn our eyes outward, for changing our focus to see the presence of God in the world and in our daily lives.** And having seen, we can begin anew to love and serve.

Amen.

Resources:

Rev. Frank Logue, Canon for Congregational Ministries for the Episcopal Diocese of Georgia.