

REFLECTIONS FOR ASCENSION SUNDAY ~ 30 May 2022

The Mount ~ The Residence at Littledale

“With the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you” (Eph 1:18). With these words, the writer of the letter to the Ephesians gives us the courage to look at the Ascension with new eyes, the eyes of our hearts. The Ascension is, without doubt, the one moment in Jesus’ life which we understand least.



The Ascension, Jesus MAFA

Even within the Gospels and Acts, the time and place of the Ascension varies. In today’s reading from the Gospel of Luke, it seems to happen on Easter Sunday. In the Acts of the Apostles, written by the same writer as the Gospel of Luke, it happens forty days after Easter Sunday. In the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, it seems to happen on Easter Sunday. In John’s Gospel, Jesus says to Mary Magdalene, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God’” (Jn 20:17), again suggesting that it happens on Easter Sunday. Matthew and Mark suggest that it happens in Galilee, Luke says that it is in Bethany, and the Acts, a mount near Jerusalem (possibly the Mount of Olives).

What is clear is that the Ascension is a metaphor for the last time that Jesus is physically present among the disciples. Jesus remains among them long enough for them to know that he is risen, that he is returning to the Father, that when he leaves the Spirit will come to be present among them,

and that they now are to become witnesses “in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the Earth” (Acts 1:8).

The sense of “being taken up to heaven” flows from the understanding of the cosmos in the time of Jesus. It was a three-part cosmos with the heavens above, an Earth centered on Jerusalem in the middle, and the underworld below. Heaven was separated from the Earth by the visible sky, a solid inverted bowl where God’s palace sat on pillars. Today our cosmology is quite different. We know that heaven is not up there nor is hell down below even though we tend to use that same language. Even our use of the word “Ascension” reflects that ancient cosmology.

The Ascension holds a sense of presence and absence. Ron Rolheiser omi reflects, “The Ascension names and highlights a paradox that lies deep at the center of life, namely, that we all reach a point in life where we can only give our presence more deeply by going away so that others can receive the full blessing of our spirits.” John Foley sj adds, “But instead of there being nothing left for us, there was now humanity transformed: a divine human person who had opened himself all the way and who was now marked with the totality of love. He was on his way back to the dynamic, swirling, Trinitarian circle of love from which his humanity had issued in the first place.”

Veronica Lawson rsm takes this transformation further when she reflects that the physical loss of Jesus means a different sort of presence, one which we have a role in making happen,

“Today’s Feast of the Ascension invites us to face the experience of loss in a transformative way. The liturgy draws us into another aspect of the Mystery, that of the presence and absence of Jesus who has been raised. They have to face the fact that the physical loss of Jesus means a new and different sort of presence and that they have a role to play in making him present in their world.”



All the biblical accounts speak to our role as witnesses to the good news. In John’s Gospel, Jesus tells Mary to go to the disciples and let them know that he is risen. In Matthew’s account, Jesus says, “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” (Matt 28:19). In Mark, Jesus says, “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation” (Mk 16:15). Both Luke and Acts have Jesus tell the disciples that they are to be witnesses to all nations, to the ends of the Earth. What we now know is that the telling the good news, the witnessing to the good news, is not just for humankind but is, as Mark says, for “the whole creation” and Acts “to the ends of the Earth. In our time, we understand this to mean the whole planetary communion and the communion of all creation.

Also new to our understanding today is the awareness that the risen Jesus who ascends still carries the wounds of his suffering and death. We saw that in the resurrection stories where Jesus proves to the disciples that he has risen by showing them the wounds in his hands and side. The Baptist minister, Aaron Coyle-Carr, brings further wisdom to our understanding of the Ascension:

In the Ascension, disability is taken into the divine life and restored to its proper place as one of the myriad reflections of the imago Dei, the very image of God. The disabled Jesus is dependent upon others. He is a survivor of trauma, and he bears its marks in his body. We have a disabled God. The Ascension is good news for human bodies because it means that a human body is already glorified and in heaven, and that Jesus Christ—who is that body—is profoundly aware of what it means to be human. Whichever portion of your embodied reality has been used to keep you from God, the Ascension of a specific, marginalized, disabled, Jewish body into heaven means that the experiences of en-fleshed humans matter.

All of the challenges posed by our response to the loss of Jesus’ physical presence are eased by the promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit, repeated often by Jesus after his resurrection: “You will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now” (Acts 1:5) and “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).



The Ascension, from Zaire, Artist Unknown



How different is the response of the disciples to ‘esus’ ascension than to his suffering and death! When they betrayed him, they ran away, they were filled with fear, they were deeply saddened, they

felt hopeless and alone. Now they “returned to Jerusalem with great joy” (Lk 24:52). They have not lost Jesus as they believed when he died. Instead, they have a new relationship to him, the risen One, strengthened by the promise of the presence of the Spirit. Psalm 47 echoes that joy, “Clap your hands, all you peoples; shout to God with loud songs of joy” (Ps 47:1). This psalm also reminds us that God is not only leader of all nations but is leader of “all the Earth” (Ps 47:7).

We conclude these reflections on this little understood moment in the life of Jesus with a poem-prayer from [Nick Fawcett](#), speaking with the voice of the disciples:

You'd think we'd have been dismayed,
wouldn't you –
to lose Jesus again, so soon after he'd
come back to us.
After all, we'd been shattered the first time,
left floundering like fish out of water
once deprived of his presence.
True, this time was different –
no cross, no agony, torment and death –
but he was gone nonetheless,
snatched away from us once more.
Only he wasn't, that's the strange thing.
He was with us much more meaningfully,
not in the flesh but in Spirit –
around us, beside us, beyond us, within
us,
touching our lives in every part.
I can't quite explain it,
but suddenly we knew he was closer than
we'd ever dreamt –
for he was not just the Messiah, the risen
Lord,
but God, one with him, one with us, the
divine in human form.
We'd walked and talked with him,
and we finally realised that we'd do so always,
to the end of time.
No wonder he blessed us when he took his leave,
for though he's far away now at the Father's side,
through his Spirit he couldn't be more near.

