

***What the Ascension Means for us Today***  
***Luke 24:44-53***  
***June 2, 2019***

Pictures of Jesus floating up while he waves goodbye to his awestruck disciples may capture the popular image today, but does it come anywhere close to what Luke is trying to tell us about the meaning of this ascension?

Unlike the 1<sup>st</sup> century readers of Luke/Acts we no longer believe in Luke's cosmology in which the earth sits on four pillars in the midst of the waters. Above the waters was a solid dome that kept back the waters from flooding the earth. This dome held back the chaos and destruction. For Luke and his readers, and for everyone until the scientific revolution of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, God lived above the dome. It is into this realm above the dome that Luke understood Jesus to be ascending into.

We possess a much more sophisticated cosmology today (*the science of the origin and development of the universe*)

From our telescopes, from the amazing photos of the universe from satellites and probes into deep space, and from the work of astronomers, we now have a much richer and more complete understanding of the universe and how it works.

Most of us know the popular catchphrase, "Beam me up Scotty," from the television series, *Star Trek*. When James Kirk, captain of the Enterprise, wants to return to the ship, this is the command he gives his engineer Scotty. Today it's not so easy to speak of the ascension in terms of Jesus "going up into heaven", since there is no ***up or down*** in space!

So how do we read Luke 24? And what does the ascension mean for us today with our much more complex understanding of the universe?

At a biblical/theological level, if nothing else, it reminds us that in Jesus' resurrection and ascension God has confirmed everything Jesus accomplished. We are told in the passage we read from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Paul says:

*God 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, 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. (Eph 1:20ff)*

Christ now occupies the place of power and authority at God's right hand. So the ascension, at the very least, means that Jesus has returned in triumph to God's dimension. Remember, as Celtic Spirituality claims, there is just a thin gossamer web separating the world we see, touch, hear, smell and taste from God's hidden dimension. That mysterious spiritual world lies just behind this physical world, not somewhere "up there in heaven"

The ascension, in other words, reminds us that we can trust that God has completed what had been planned before creation. This is where the story from Genesis to Jesus has been leading us. The ascension is the final word in the story. Or should I say, the penultimate word. For it ushered in the in-between time that marks the period between Christ's ascension and his coming again to establish the new realm of heaven on earth. We live in that in-between time. Before Jesus departs he provides clarity on his relationship to the Old Testament Scriptures. We notice that Jesus had to open their minds in order for them to understand these scriptures. Beginning with Moses, through the Psalms and prophets, in short the three major categories of these scriptures, Jesus shows how he is connected to them. This little Greek word we translate **open** is the same word used by Luke to describe Lydia's experience when God opened her heart to receive the good news.

This should remind us that the scriptures are not self-explanatory. They require proclamation, teaching and the Spirit's dynamic and opening power to bring their relevance and meaning to a person.

My personal story bears this out.

I know we often hear that the bible is simple and all you have to do is believe. But its not! Not only does it represent an ancient language that is foreign to us, but also it contains layers of culture, tradition and history from a pre-scientific world. Even the disciples didn't get the connections and they lived with Jesus for three years. If they needed their hearts and minds opened, perhaps we do too!

After demonstrating how he was integral to the ancient story of Israel, Jesus then explains the content of the good news they are to proclaim. It is a message of repentance and forgiveness. They will be the witnesses to this news. The word in the Greek means **martyrs**. This will not be a popular message because it demands a change of mind and heart. The bible calls this repentance. It asks for the recognition of Christ's lordship in every corner of people's lives. Such a message flies in the face of all our natural inclinations.

Here is my sense of the disciples' experience. They are reduced to awe and praise. It drives them to worship. They worshipped Jesus as he disappeared from their world. Luke uses the little word **joy** to describe their emotions at this time.

If there is anything that ought to characterize our Sunday mornings in the sanctuary it is surely this emotion. The experience of the ascension filled them with joy. It could have been a heavy emotional parting with their Lord as he disappeared for the last time. But instead you can imagine them skipping down the hill singing.

And the reason for his departure, John tells us, is so that the Spirit assumes our Lord's place. Instead of being in one place at a time, Jesus is now able by his Spirit to be everywhere and in each one of us. She not only inspires us to live in harmony with Jesus, but also empowers us to live out the good news of grace. Jesus now lives within each of his followers all over the world through the Spirit. The Spirit leads us, comforts us, teaches us, inspires us and provokes us to live out our faith.

After this emotional parting the disciples are to wait for this Spirit's arrival. We too in West Flamboro need to be waiting for the Spirit's direction before we do anything.

***Amen***