

Basics of the Faith: The Ascension
Acts 1:1-11
May 24, 2020

The Easter season ends today with the feast of the Ascension. You will be hard pressed to find an Ascension greeting card. Perhaps, as one commentator suggests, we could use it as a logo for a climbing gear advertisement: *Follow Christ into the Clouds!* Well, perhaps not! For the average person in the pews today who struggle with a myriad of personal and social and relationship issues, what does this feast of the Ascension do for us? We understand why Christmas and Easter are central to our faith, perhaps even Pentecost, but we're less sure about this feast. Let's at least run over the story and see where it takes us.

Luke writes this two-volume work to apparent benefactor, Theophilus by name, "God lover" in Greek. In book one he outlines in an orderly way everything Jesus said and did right up to his ascension. In book two, or Acts, he provides an orderly account of what the church did in Jesus' name. For Luke this "lifting up" is the hinge that holds his two books together. At Luke 9:51, following the event of Transfiguration, Luke warns that *the days drew near for him to be taken up*. This "taking up" is in fact Jesus' "exodus," the object of the discussion that Moses and Elijah were having on the mount of transfiguration in Luke 9:31. In short, Jesus' ascension, recorded in Acts 1, is nothing less than his exodus from the earth, mirroring Elijah's own mysterious ascension in a fiery chariot in 2 Kings 2:9-11.

You may remember the Elijah's story. Elijah's time has come to depart this life and his disciple Elisha wants him to stay. Elisha insists on staying with his master right up to the end. The scene is set. Elijah stands at the edge of the Jordan river, with Elisha at his side. Elijah takes his cloak, rolls it up, and strikes the water. It divided and the two prophets walked across on dry land. At the other side Elijah asks his disciple if there is anything he can do for him. Elisha says that he simply wants to be like Elijah. Elijah tells him that if he stays with him and watches while he is taken away he will get what he asks for. As they walked along talking all of a sudden a chariot appeared with horses of fire and Elijah was whisked up into the blue sky. Elisha saw it all happening and cried out, *My father, my father*, and it was over.

He picked up Elijah's cloak that had fallen from him, ripped it to pieces, took them back to the river's edge and hit the water. He cried out, *where is the God of Elijah?* And sure enough the river divided and Elisha walked across.

One can be sure, I think, that Luke's account of Jesus parting from the disciples draws on stories like this one from the sacred scriptures of Israel. You may remember that Jesus had often been identified as Elijah resurrected, the prophet of justice. By so doing, Luke, in his unique literary style, uses the ascension motif as a way of preaching to us a sermon about the true identity of Jesus Messiah, recalling his many roots in the sacred past of Israel's story.

Pictures of Jesus floating up while he waves goodbye to his awestruck disciples reminds me of something out of Monty Python. It's an idea and image so far removed from our everyday experience that it probably creates a feeling of incredulity for most of us.

Luke tells us that Jesus appeared to the disciples several times over the period of forty days after the resurrection. But the disciples haven't really understood what is happening. He commands them to stay in Jerusalem until the promised Spirit comes. As they watched, he was taken up and disappeared in a cloud. Can you picture the scene? They stood there, staring into the empty sky, with their necks strained as they gaze up at the disappearing Jesus. I don't know what was going through their minds at that point. But all they saw was the empty sky and silence. Then two men stood beside them and asked: *You Galileans! —Why do you just stand here looking up at an empty sky? This very Jesus who was taken up from among you to heaven will come as certainly—and mysteriously—as he left.* But here you are rooted to the spot.

When I was a very new Christian I got caught up in these very questions. The church I went to was part of a movement that was intrigued by the questions the disciples were asking. When will the end come and what will be the signs of that coming? I used to go with the elders of the church to conferences on eschatology, or the science of the end times. Prominent speakers would be flown in who were so-called experts in the field of prophecy. They would point to

their elaborate time charts and teach us why we could expect Jesus' return very soon because of contemporary political developments. The book of Revelation was always a favourite source for these sorts of speculations. These were signs, we were told, that the end was near.

But the reality is that we moderns have a totally different cosmology from these 1st century readers of Luke/Acts. We no longer believe the earth sits on four pillars in the midst of the waters. In the cosmology of Luke's world these waters threatened the earth, but were kept back from flooding the earth by a solid dome we call sky. This dome held back the chaos and destruction. For the writer of Acts, or indeed all the New Testament writers, this was their understanding of the universe. For them God lived above the dome. It is into this realm above the dome that Luke understood Jesus to be ascending into.

We live today with a much more sophisticated scientific understanding of how the universe works. From our telescopes, from the amazing photos of the universe from satellites and probes into deep space, and from the work of astronomers and cosmologists, we now have a much richer understanding of the universe and how it works. Today it's not so easy to speak about the ascension given our knowledge of the universe. Determining what is up or down in our galaxy is a tad more complicated.

Nevertheless, Jesus disappeared into some reality; probably what society and we commonly refer to as heaven. Yes, even among those for whom church remains a relic of a bygone age, words like, "heaven" or "a better place" or "a place of rest" remains popular. Just what that heaven might look like is a mystery.

So how do we read the ascension passages like the ones we read today in Acts? Given our modern cosmology, and how we think about the origin, evolution, and eventual fate of the universe, what can Jesus' ascension mean today? And why does it matter?

At each communion service we recite the creed and say: *He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead.*

Now if asked, by anyone, or particularly by someone under 30 who has never had contact with the faith, how do we explain what this means? If what Rachel Evans in her book, *Searching for Sunday*, says about what young folk in their 20's and 30's is looking for today then we need to pay attention. She claims that there is a deep human need met when the church is involved in the ancient practices of communion, baptism, anointing the sick and healing. She says, however, that: *we need to creatively re-articulate the significance of the traditional teachings and sacraments of the church in a modern context.*

So I ask, what if we approach the ascension creatively and try to rearticulate it's meaning for us post-modern folk living out our lives in 2020?

For one obvious thing, we need to avoid a ***simplistic literalism*** when reading passages like the ones before us today. A man who was confined within his ancient scientific world of meaning wrote Luke and Acts. It's tempting, I know, to interpret the scene of Jesus floating up beyond the clouds as if Luke was providing a video account of that event. But he wasn't! There is a whole world of mystery here that ought to leave us, as it did the disciples, awestruck. What I think the ascension means is that Jesus has left our time/space reality for good. It's as if the curtain has come down on the third act of the play that began in the garden and we are entering into the final act of the drama that leads to the closing curtain. Luke's ascension story closes the book on that phase of Jesus' resurrection appearances.

There is a finality written large in this ascension story. No longer will the physical presence of Jesus be experienced. Instead of him being limited to being in one place at a time, Jesus is now able, by the Spirit, to be everywhere.

So, if ascension means anything at all to us today, it means that in this event God has ***confirmed everything Jesus had accomplished in his life, death and resurrection.*** He returns to where he came from, God's dimension, or that mysterious realm that exists just behind the material world we touch every day. Paul puts it this way in his majestic language in Ephesians: *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.

This is a metaphor for the place of power and authority that Jesus now occupies. The ascension bankrolls the idea that God completed what had been planned from before creation, namely the redemption of the human family. The ascension is the final word in story. Or should I say, the penultimate word. For it ushered in the in-between time between Christ's disappearance in the ascension and his coming again to establish the new realm of heaven on earth. We live in that in-between time.

This is why the ascension matters. It signals the beginning of a new chapter in God's plan for the world. Christians now carry on the work of Jesus. And it means that his life, his Spirit, is shared with each Christian and lives in them. Through their lives the Spirit of Jesus continues the work of reconciliation and forgiveness and healing. Without the Ascension the world would be without this great band of witnesses who share the story and grace of Christ. Churches like this one are reminded by this feast of the Ascension that we are called to take on the role the physical Jesus of Nazareth performed while on earth. Now God's Spirit not only inspires us to live in harmony with Jesus, but also empowers us to live out the good news of repentance and forgiveness and to proclaim the evangelion in our words, actions and attitudes. The Spirit leads us, comforts us, teaches us, inspires us and provokes us to live out our faith.

Amen