

A Progressive Look at the Ascension

‘Why Do You Stand Looking Up to Heaven?’

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

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May 13, 2018

Well, if you love in-depth Bible study and theological exploration this sermon is for you! If you think the story of the Resurrection, and the accounts of Jesus' appearances to the disciples *after* his resurrection are difficult to explain to modern progressive Christians, then just what do you think we ought to do with the story of Jesus' ascension into heaven?

Like some progressives, I could simply ignore the story altogether, as I have for the past six 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. For unlike those of ancient times, we no longer believe in a three-tiered universe with heaven above, hell (or the place of the dead) beneath, and a flat earth sandwiched in the middle. Therefore, the literal visual image of Jesus disappearing off into the clouds, as he does in so many paintings of this story, just doesn't make any logical, rational sense. After all, **one of the hallmarks of progressive Christianity is that it be intellectually honest.**

Any of those approaches, however, would simply be the easy way out. Instead, I think we should do what needs to 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 any story is trying to reveal. And yes, I believe the Holy Spirit is part of this revealing process.

So, one of the literary purposes has the theological function of getting the resurrected body of Jesus to be where it can sit at the right hand of God and help rule the universe. But try explaining where and how a physical Jesus is sitting at the right hand of and invisible spirit God. I'll save that for another sermon. But there's more. 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. Did you notice?

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 [the two disciples he met on the road to Emmaus] out as far as Bethany [about 2 miles south of Jerusalem], 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 as 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. And it occurs at

the Mount of Olives near Jerusalem, not Bethany. **So, which is it?** Biblical literalists have a fit 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 calendar 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 early Christian church (the Book of Acts).**

So, then, how do we approach this story as theologically and biblically progressive Christians? This may help. Under the entry "Ascension" in the *New Interpreters Bible Dictionary* [a huge 5-volume set], it has a paragraph under the heading, *Ascension and metaphorical language*. It states:

Especially since the Enlightenment and the rise of biblical criticism [which is a modern way to interpret the Bible by looking at the source, authorship, and literary and historical context of the text], the ascension has been taken as a stock example of a mythological worldview, a perception of reality that was bound up with the conception of the world as part of a three-tiered universe and hence outdated.

In our time, more appreciation is expressed for **the significance of myth and metaphor as ways of saying that which cannot be said literally or cannot be reduced to propositional statements.** Seen from that perspective, the ascension of Jesus may still be a forceful way of describing a reality that cannot be expressed otherwise.

That, in a nutshell, is an excellent description of the approach to biblical interpretation taken by progressive Christians. John Holbert, Professor of Homiletics at Perkins School of Theology at SMU in Dallas puts it this way. "The church has spent far too much of its time and energies focusing on the wrong things when it comes to reading these Lukan accounts. **Luke is preaching, not reporting; he is sermonizing, not summarizing. His truth is not rooted in when or where, but in what it means and why it is important.** There is more theological poetry in Luke than historical postulates."

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 isn't really what happened to Jesus, then, but rather that his disciples – a fearful, anxious, bewildered, powerless and waiting community – 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 Christ (or God) with and within them.

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, from Jesus to the church. Biblically, **the story of the Ascension functioned as the transition point when the disciples**

became apostles – the transformation 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.**

Taking a good hard look at our focus as a congregation, and then working out strategies to fulfill those goals, is exactly what the ruling elders on our Session did at our annual retreat in January. Next Sunday, you will hear and see a presentation of the four major goals we focused on in working to fulfill our Mission Statement. I encourage you to be here, for it is also Pentecost Sunday when we will throw a party in celebration of the birth of the Christian church.

Perhaps most importantly, however, the story of the ascension also reveals that there comes a time to transition from focusing inward to turning outward. In my favorite part of the story, and the part that has the most profound implications for you and me, and us together as a congregation, 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?**’” Wouldn’t you and I be staring up at someone floating up into the sky?

In others words, **there is a time to stop looking up and start looking out, to get on with it, for there is important work to be done out in a hurting world.** To put it another way, in our journey of faith **we are called not to be spectators, but as those who carry on and carry out the ministry began by Jesus.** That is how we bear witness to God’s Presence in our midst – living as God would have us live, out there on the front lines making a difference – as individuals, yes, but especially together as a community of faith. Jesus is no longer physically present to heal the sick, feed the hungry, and care for the marginalized and outcast. That mission fell to Jesus’ disciples. This is the mission that now falls to us!

I want to close with a familiar prayer attributed to Teresa of Avila, a Carmelite nun and contemplative mystic who lived back in the 1500s as the Reformation was sweeping through Spain. Reflect upon how the sentiments of this prayer can help us to liturgically transition from the life of Jesus to the role of the church, a primary focus of the upcoming season of Pentecost.

*God of love, help us to remember
that Christ has no body now on earth but ours,
no hands but ours, no feet but ours.
Ours are the eyes to see the needs of the world.
Ours are the hands with which to bless everyone now.
Our are the feet with which Christ is to go about doing good.*

The question, “Why do you stand looking up to heaven?” is our call to action. As you may be aware, the term “**apostle**” 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. Ours is a call to go from the place where we gaze into the clouds to the places where the world needs Christ. We are sent out to be the hands, feet, eyes, ears and voice of Christ.”

Amen.

Resources:

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