

“WHICH WAY IS UP?”

Acts 1:1-11

(05-16-21) Ascension

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There's a story of a minister who as a young girl used to attend a church in which there was a very large stained glass window at the front divided into two panes. The left hand pane pictured Jesus kneeling in the Garden of Gethsemane, his face anguished, a red blood-tear on his cheek. On sunny Sunday mornings, the sun would turn that tear into a glittering ruby. The right hand pane pictured Jesus ascending, his face serene and radiant, his hands at his sides, a faint, pin sized dot on each outstretched palm, his feet off the ground as he rose. Many questions ran through the four year old girl's mind, among them, "Who cries red tears?" and, "Why isn't he wearing shoes?" I would stand on the pew, in my frilly church dress, my hands resting on the pew looking at the window, staring, first at one side, then the other, for as much of the sermon as my mother would allow, recalls the minister. Until she tugged on the hem of my dress and whispered "What are you looking at? Sit down and pay attention." Finally, one day I was able to put my confusion into words, "Why won't that happy man help that sad man?" She answered me, said the minister, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. **She said, "They're the same man."**¹ Today is Ascension Sunday, it's the day we mark the ascension of Jesus into heaven after his resurrection from the dead. Part of why the ascension of Jesus is so important for Christians is exactly what the stained glass window at that minister's church was trying to depict. The Jesus who knelt and suffered in the Garden of Gethsemane, the Jesus who would later be arrested, tortured and crucified on the cross, **this Jesus is the same Jesus who would be raised from the dead and then ascend into heaven.**

The early church struggled in its initial understanding of Jesus, **whether** he was, and **how** he was, both God and human, or whether he was only Spirit, and his human body an illusion, which would have given a very different understanding to the suffering Jesus endured and the death he experienced on the cross.

Early Gnostics, who believed that only the spirit was pure and argued that the material world was created not by God, who was pure, but by a lesser being, claimed that Jesus, as the Son of God, could not have been a physical human being, and that his body was merely an illusion.

The early church leaders countered that claim, **insisting that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine.** To be consistent with that understanding, **it was critical that Jesus' resurrection was a bodily one, that the same Jesus who died on the cross was the one who emerged from the tomb, showed himself to the disciples and ascended into heaven. They're the same Jesus.** So maybe we're a little clearer about why the ascension was, and is still, important to Christian theology and hope, but some other, less helpful ideas have also developed from the traditional depiction of the ascension of Jesus. Many of us might have seen pictures of Jesus'

¹ Alyce McKenzie, "He Ascended into Heaven" Patheos

ascension similar to that depicted on the stained glass windows of that minister's church, Jesus rising above the gathered disciples, no shoes, maybe some angels around him, maybe a cloud or two in the background.

In almost all the depictions of the ascension, the followers of Jesus who are pictured, are looking up, their eyes fixed on the Jesus who rises up above them. But say you were there, how would you picture the ascension? There are two accounts of the ascension of Jesus, one from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles from which Andrea read this morning and the other from the Gospel according to Luke which I read earlier.

The story in Acts says that as his followers were watching Jesus was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. The gospel account from Luke says that while Jesus was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. If you read Luke's full account, it's obvious that Jesus ascends into heaven on Easter day, while Acts says that Jesus stayed with his friends for 40 days after his resurrection before ascending. Strangely enough, both Luke and Acts are thought to have been written by the same author. So maybe the point is that its not important to get the precise details of the accounts to harmonize with each other, that even the writer of Luke/Acts, wasn't concerned with making his accounts exactly literally identical, **but that the idea of ascension, that the same Jesus who died was raised and leaves the earth to one day return, is key to our faith, our witness and our hope.**

But sometimes we do get fixated on the details and the depictions of Jesus rising up to heaven has been one of those points. **Jesus rises up, but which way is up?** There's a neat program that uses Google Maps that can tell you exactly where the opposite location on the earth is from where you are right now. The place that is exactly opposite of where we are right now at RPC, is in the southern Indian Ocean, off the tip of Africa, close to Antarctica, near what is known as the French Southern and Antarctic Lands. The exact opposite to Jerusalem would be the southern Pacific Ocean, south of French Polynesia, almost halfway between the western coast of Australia and the eastern coast of Chile. **So, if you were at this location during Jesus' ascension, did Jesus go up or did he go down?**

The point of this perhaps pointless question is to point out that the cosmology of the biblical writers was very different from our present understanding of the universe. In first century Palestine, the world was understood to be more or less flat. Earth was the center of the created universe and the sun and the stars revolved around the earth. Above the earth was the sky, with the sun, moon and stars, and above that would have been heaven. Jesus went up to heaven because that's where heaven was located. But in a post Galilean world, we know that the earth is round and revolves around the sun, which itself revolves around a galaxy called the Milky Way, which is only one of billions and billions of galaxies stretching as far as the Hubble Telescope can see. **So where is heaven and which way is up?**

In a pre-scientific world view, Jesus ascended up to heaven and that cosmology helped shape a theology of separation of heaven from earth which hasn't always proven to be helpful. **When heaven is a destination apart from earth, it can lead to a way of thinking about this earth and those who inhabit it, which is like a form of Gnosticism, that the only place that ultimately matters is heaven and that we're just putting in our time here on earth until we get up there.** What happens to us here is just an appetizer for the main course that awaits in heaven, our joys and sufferings here on earth don't compare and won't matter when we go up to heaven.

I remember reading about Christian missionaries from North America in Korea during the years when Korea was under occupation by Japan. The Koreans wanted to resist and fight, but the missionaries, knowing that they were badly outnumbered and outgunned, counseled them not to fight but to focus on their inner faith, promising them that they would be rewarded in heaven for the suffering they would have to endure in this life. **But our theology should not be dictated by our cosmology and I don't get the sense that Jesus wanted his followers to spend their days looking up towards a heaven beyond the stars but rather to lower their gaze to the needs of the world in which they lived.** When Jesus left his disciples, two men in white robes suddenly stood by them saying to them, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" **The point perhaps being, don't just stand there looking up, do something.**

In the gospel account from Luke, before his ascension Jesus taught his followers about what had been written about him in the scriptures and that as his followers the disciples had work to do. The promise is clear and certain, **Jesus will be with us and the work of those who follow him is to proclaim the good news of repentance and forgiveness to all.** The work of those who would follow Jesus isn't to get ready for heaven, **but to engage in the ministry that Jesus modeled and entrusted to his disciples.** Jesus promised the Holy Spirit, but he promised the Spirit so that his disciples, who one day would become known as the church, **would carry on his ministry of love, compassion, mercy and grace, of the call to repentance and forgiveness, of healing, wholeness and renewal, here on earth.** In fact, the mystery is that Jesus leaves his disciples so that in his physical absence, those disciples can grow, can mature, can be filled with the Holy Spirit and become a new creation, a new thing, a body called the church, whose head is Christ himself.

One of the traditions is that Jesus ascended from what is known as the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. Today at the highest point of the Mount of Olives stands the Augusta Victoria Hospital, administered by the Lutheran World Federation. The hospital staff serve Palestinians who are living in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Those working in the hospital are experts

in, among other things, radiation therapy and pediatric kidney dialysis.² Sadly, the current conflict in Israel and in Gaza will only serve to make the work of the hospital that much more difficult.

Instead of looking up, those who work at the top of the Mount of Olives are looking around, to serve the needs of those who are suffering and hurting, to bring healing and restoration to those who are broken, who are afraid. **Earthly needs are being met now, not being deferred to a life to come in heaven, though the promise of that life to come is sure and certain.**

We who follow Jesus today, on this Ascension Sunday, know that we can't have a theology that causes us to stand here looking up, **as if heaven is only a place which is apart from the earth.** We know in our cosmology that heaven isn't someplace beyond the sun and the stars, **and in our theology we would confess that heaven, if it needs a location, might best be understood to be where God is present, where Christ is present, where the Holy Spirit is present and as those who are filled with that Spirit, where we are present in that Spirit, doing the work of ministry that Jesus showed us and commanded and entrusted to us, where the hope of unconditional love and eternal life infuses the response to whatever life may bring and where God's presence is made most manifest.**

Don't look up, look around, lower your gaze. It's in work like the ministry of the Richmond Food Bank or the Safe Arms coalition of churches sponsoring refugees, it's in the work of churches like City Centre Church in Surrey and their food program, in our proposed program of hosting a community meal beginning this fall, when those who are hungry, tired and weary, afraid and uncertain are offered welcome, fed with food and nourished with dignity, provided safety and treated with grace, **this is where the hope of heaven meets the reality of the earth, where God is present and God's purpose is being done.**

Which way is up? If we're talking about heaven, it's every way, every way where God's people are doing God's work, where the church follows in the footsteps of its Lord and Master, engaging in ministry for those on earth, those whom Jesus loves and desires to heal, restore, renew and make whole.

Somebody, somewhere, nearby or halfway around the world needs our care, our compassion, our commitment and our love. **Jesus physically leaves the particular place where his disciples were so that he would be present everywhere through the Spirit,** that by that Spirit those who follow him, will become the church Jesus desires us to be, the new creation, the witnesses he commands us to be. **So friends, may we follow the one who reigns and be bearers of his blessing to all we meet.** Thanks be to God, Amen.

² Blair R. Monie, "Why Are You Looking Up?" Patheos