

THE MYSTERY OF THE ASCENSION
The Seventh Sunday of Easter (the Ascension Observed)
May 28, 2017

This morning we read the accounts by the author who wrote both Luke and Acts of the final days on earth of Jesus' resurrected body, and his Ascension. The Ascension is familiar to most of us who attended Sunday Schools: the image, or the movie in the mind's eye, of Jesus, his arms outstretched in the orans or praying position, slowly and with dignity rising up into the clouds and then the heavens. Did this happen? How did it happen? What are we to take from it? *What does the Ascension mean?*

We say in our most often used Eucharistic prayer: "Therefore we proclaim the mystery of faith: Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again." The Ascension is one of the mysteries of faith; it is one of the things that happened between "Christ is risen" and "Christ will come again." Christ—the *risen* Christ—has to leave the earth in a miraculous way. After rising from the dead, it would make no sense for him to live a life like other people, one that ended either in a second death or—what?

It is a mystery. While modern mainstream Biblical scholars agree that Christ's rising to heaven is symbolic, the symbolism remains mysterious, which is perhaps as it should be. For humankind, left behind, it means we prepare ourselves for a new kind of faith and a new kind of practice, different from that

of the disciples, who walked the dusty roads with Jesus. Now we're alone in one sense, but never alone in another.

We try to solve the mystery for ourselves with another mystery: the presence of the Trinity. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. "I send the promise of my Father upon you," Jesus says, "But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high." That sentence, its speaker, its subject and its conditional clause, "until you are clothed with power from on high," ushers in what later became understood as the Trinity. And the Trinity is most of all a way of taking in the mystery of God's presence and the manifestations of God's presence in our lives.

The Ascension is another springtime event in the life of the church, and in our lives. Jesus' departure from this earth, described in both the First Reading and the gospel reading for the day, is about renewal, our new life.

The Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts were written by the same person; together they tell the story of Jesus and the later actions of his followers who created the Church. The Ascension marks the dividing line between Jesus' life among us, and how his disciples fared without his physical presence among them, but with the Holy Spirit animating all that they did to further the Kingdom.

In Luke, Jesus' ascension happens on the day of the Resurrection, after his appearances on the road to Emmaus, and to the disciples, when he says he

is hungry and is given a piece of fish to eat. Then he leads “them out as far as Bethany,” as the gospel says, and “while he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up to heaven.”

The text of Acts tells a different story: “After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.” And at the last meeting with his disciples, he teaches them, and then, Acts says, “When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.” As they stare up toward heaven in wonder, two men in white robes appear and assure them that he will come again “in the same way as you saw him go into heaven”

The considerable differences in the two stories surely emphasize to us that the writer of Luke and Acts, like other gospel writers and other writers of many of the books throughout the Bible, was interested not in recounting historical facts, but in telling the stories of God’s presence and actions in the world and what they mean for us.

The theologian Paul Tillich sees the Ascension as symbolic of what he calls Christ as a New Being, embodying the bringing the divine and human together in a redemptive way that is for us an utterly new revelation.

Ascension, he says, symbolizes Christ’s permanent separation from historical

existence, contrasting it with the Resurrection, which was followed by new appearances by the risen Christ.

Karl Barth, another great theologian of the last century, had a different view. Here's what one commentator, Andrew Burgess, writes of Barth's insights:

“.... To say that Jesus is ascended is to make a *theological* statement about God's exaltation of the crucified Jesus. It is not a quasi-historical description of Jesus' movement through space, or a statement about the 'physical location' of Jesus. Rather, it is (in Barth's words) the confession that the crucified and risen Jesus 'went to God,' and so entered the 'reality [*Weltwirklichkeit*] by which humans are always surrounded.'”

Resurrection and Ascension, then, are about the man Jesus transforming into an eternal presence, an eternal reality *available to us*. We are firmly informed that the chapter of Jesus as an earthly presence is closed until he comes again. And of course, no sooner has he departed than, next week in Church time, the coming of the Holy Spirit is announced and celebrated.

So these three weeks, Ascension, Pentecost, and finally the Trinity, comprise the springtime progression or unfolding of renewal, of new life, that we act out as part of the annual cycle of our natural world. It is the manifestation of the divine that enables us to renew ourselves, to create hope

and the reality of forgiveness, redemption—all these words that we use to describe how we repair our broken humanity with God’s grace and forgiveness.

It is the Ascension that sets the stage, with the departure of Jesus from the world and from the historical record, to make way for the entrance of the Holy Spirit and at the last, the proclamation of the Holy Trinity, which is the Church’s summary of its best apprehension of the mystery of all that God is in the world and also beyond our imagining fully. Through it all, nonetheless, we are nourished and sustained by the mystery of faith and the strength we receive from living in love as fully as we can, nourished and formed by that mystery.

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