



SERMONS THAT WORK

Ascension Day Year C

A Dramatic Turn

[RCL]: Acts 1:1-11; Psalm 47 or Psalm 93; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53

O King of Glory, Lord of Hosts, Who did ascend in triumph above all the heavens, leave us not orphaned, but send upon us the Spirit of Truth, promised by the Father.

Today our Easter celebrations take a dramatic turn. Today we recognize the otherworldly departure and absence of our Lord, as we remember his ascension. The Ascension is a building block of the Christian faith, figuring noticeably into our worship practices for centuries. More than a relic of history, we profess Jesus's ascension week-after-week in the words of the Nicene Creed: "He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father." Each year, forty days after we celebrate his glorious resurrection, we celebrate—or, maybe "acknowledge" is a better word—our Lord being taken up into the clouds.

Though the Ascension is a mainstay of the Christian faith, it often plays at least second fiddle to other feast days. Perhaps this is because we have little to add to the transcendent and otherworldly scene. The Ascension is a beautiful and soaring reality that can – if we are honest – feel something like a thief in the night. Just as we have gotten accustomed to having Jesus around again, he is taken away from us. Gone are those revelatory post-resurrection breakfasts on the beach, the beautifully detailed scenes of Jesus' appearing to his friends over chargrilled fish. Gone too are those profound teaching moments on the Emmaus road, as Jesus is known afresh in the breaking of the bread. Even Thomas' tactile epiphany of the risen Lord and his exclamation, "My Lord and my God," has seemingly faded into oblivion. It can easily feel like the Ascension has silenced all the fanfare and excitement that the Resurrection enacted just forty days earlier, as the Lord is seized to some mystical, faraway place.

We hear two accounts of Jesus' ascending this day: one from the Gospel of Luke and the other from the book of Acts. We are invited into this near-incredible narrative to stand shoulder-to-shoulder alongside the disciples, to hear Jesus's proclamation of the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. And just as those first disciples, we are invited to have our own minds opened to the scriptures anew, as we then crane our necks up toward heaven, dumbfounded as our Lord vanishes in the clouds. "Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" the strange messengers ask. While a seemingly benign question, it almost sounds silly to ask. Why?

The most obvious answer, at least on the surface, appears to have something to do with the strange events unfolding before his disciples' eyes. In a flash, their lord, their teacher and friend, has disappeared. It seems like the question should be something like: How could we *not* stare into the clouds that seem to have swallowed him up? Why did Jesus have to leave? Could he not have stayed? Why did he have to ascend?

There have been several answers to the question of why Jesus ascended in the history of the Church. One of the most lasting answers has been to see Jesus' ascension as necessarily making possible our own ascension to God. Just as he was taken up, so will each of us be taken up at the last into the nearer presence of God. "Mighty Lord, in thine ascension," the old hymn goes, "we by faith behold our own."

Witnessing Jesus ascend, in other words, is like witnessing humanity's fate played out in plain, albeit dramatic, sight. Even as the disciples watch Jesus being taken up, they are proleptically watching themselves ascend, perhaps sensing that remarkable soaring feeling in the depths of their humanity. As those today in relationship with the risen Christ, the Ascension affords us the fulfilled promise of our very selves being lifted up at the last, where we will dwell in and with God in a gloriously new way. Jesus went back up to God to prepare our place, to pave our way up there. This is, in no small part, the beautiful promise of Jesus' ascension.

We can take heart that in the moment that, as Jesus is lifted up, the disciples are standing alongside one another—they are not alone. In their wonder and amazement and confusion, the disciples are together, as they begin to cope with Jesus' absence, as they learn to live into this new, startling way of love.

In the wake of Jesus' absence, the disciples experience something unexpected. With their faces turned to the sky, the disciples see Jesus raise his hand in blessing, as the Gospel of Luke tells us. That, as he is lifted up, the reach of Jesus' blessing broadens, widening in scope from the disciples, to Jerusalem, and eventually, to the corners of the earth. It is a stunning image that majestically depicts the ever-growing expansiveness of love, covering "all that is" so that God might fill all things, even as God is above all things, to paraphrase St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

Whether the disciples realize it or not, they begin to live into this blessing by turning their gaze away from the heavens and beginning to look around at one another. In Luke's account, those gathered join together in worship, perhaps recognizing the Ascension in concert with Jesus's life, ministry, death, and resurrection. Following the Ascension, the book of Acts tells us, the disciples returned to Jerusalem, to that secret room they had occupied, in order to devote themselves to prayer. Peter, James, and John; Andrew, Philip, and Thomas; Bartholomew, Matthew, and James; Simon, Judas, and Mary, all come together to parse out what this blessing might mean in their context and in light of Jesus' example and teaching.

Aside from the momentary loss, then, the two accounts of the Ascension described a worshipful and prayerful people, who are coming to realize the breadth and depth of God's saving love. Beyond looking up at the sky to witness humanity's fate played out in real time, the Ascension, in a very concrete sense,

puts into motion the beginnings of the Church: a group of fitful and faithful folks working together in the absence of the One who brought them together in the first place.

It has become commonplace to celebrate the Church's birthday on the Feast of Pentecost, as that special and unique occasion of the Holy Spirit's dramatic empowering of God's people from every tribe and tongue. But maybe this birthday is being celebrated nine days too late. For here, in the wake of Jesus' ascension, we glimpse those first disciples worshiping, praying, and no doubt, seeking what the Lord would have them to do in community with one another.

As those gathered together in Jesus's name, might we receive the mystery and richness of the Ascension afresh this day. Might we, by faith, witness our own ascending, as we see the Lord disappear from view. But might we then cast our gaze from the heavens to the world around us, cognizant of Christ's blessing that covers and fills all, as we continue to work for the building up of the Church. *Amen.*

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