

The Sunday after Ascension Day  
June 1, 2014  
St. Timothy's Episcopal Church  
The Rev. Andrew D. Parker

I hope you all had a good Ascension Day last week!

You did know it was Ascension Day, didn't you? Ok, so here's a test: Which day was it? Thursday. Yes, Ascension Day fell on a Thursday this year.

Actually, Ascension Day falls on a Thursday every year. That's because, as the book of Acts tells us, Jesus ascended into heaven 40 days after his resurrection on Easter. Add it up!

As we heard in that lesson today from Acts, the Ascension is about the risen Jesus leaving this earth and passing into heaven. But the Bible is very circumspect about just how this happens. The whole description takes up only a part of one verse: *as [the disciples] were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.*

(1) Remarkably, the doctrine of the Ascension, enshrined in our Creeds, is a doctrine of the absence of Christ. So is it any wonder that the Ascension is the most forgotten feast day of the year? Who wants to celebrate absence?

As we try to wrestle with this story and this doctrine, the first thing to get straight is this notion of heaven. Obviously, heaven is not up in the sky. It's not somewhere in the stratosphere or even in outer space. In fact, it's not at any location on our space-time continuum. The word "heaven" is a metaphor for a completely different dimension altogether, a spiritual dimension which interpenetrates and interlocks the dimension that we live in. Something like Narnia in the C.S. Lewis books.

Despite what a lot of modern people think, the early Christians knew the word *heaven* was a metaphor. They didn't believe in "a three-decker universe, with heaven up in the sky and hell down below....When they spoke of 'up and down,' they...were using metaphors that were so obvious they didn't need spelling out."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, p. 115.

So, when we say that forty days after he was raised from the dead, Jesus ascended from earth to heaven, we're saying that his risen body and person passed out of our earthly dimension into the spiritual dimension. He returned to the Father—to use other Biblical language.

(2) That's an amazing doctrine—that when Jesus ascended he took our humanity and our embodiedness into God. And it might be a bit of a shock for anyone who thought that in the Incarnation, Jesus, “having been divine, stopped being divine and became human. And that, after having been human for a while, at Easter he stopped being human and went back to being divine.”<sup>2</sup>

Not so. In the Incarnation, the divine became human. In the Ascension, the human was taken into the divine. If we had time, we could take this a lot of directions: What does this say about the dignity of human nature? What does it say about our ultimate fate, if Jesus “goes before us...into heaven?”

(3) But we can't go there now. Right now, we have to face the hard fact that the Bible and the Creed teach that Jesus, in his embodied humanity, is absent from this present world. On one hand, it's hard. It's a cause for heartbreak. On the other hand, it explains a lot. It explains why the world is still a mess and *why* we are broken-hearted. It explains why Jesus said in today's gospel reading: *I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world.*<sup>3</sup>

It allows for the possibility that nearly half the population of Syria has been displaced by its civil war, that more than 200 girls in Nigeria have been kidnapped to become slaves, and that fathers sometimes abuse their daughters.

Jesus is Lord. He is King of all the earth, but not in his fullness. That fullness has not yet come—an obvious point if you watch the news. So, this is another deep truth of the Ascension. It teaches us that this is not all there is, that that way things are on earth is not the way things will always be. The Ascension sets up the next doctrine in the Creed, which is the Second Coming, the Parousia.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.111.

<sup>3</sup> John 17.11.

As our lesson today from Acts puts it in the mouth of the two angels: *Why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.*"<sup>4</sup>

"There is another world hidden in this one. It is God's future."<sup>5</sup>

(4) But even this is not the whole truth of the Ascension. Yes, Jesus takes his humanity into God. And, yes, as a result he is, in an important sense, absent from us. But, in another equally important sense, he is present to us in a new way, as the Holy Spirit.

Jesus' ascent into heaven is the flip-side of the descent of the Holy Spirit. The Ascension is the flip-side of Pentecost. That's why, in the Farewell Discourse in John, Jesus says: *I will not leave you orphaned...If you loved me you would rejoice that I am going to the Father...for I will send to you from the Father, the Advocate, the Spirit of truth.*<sup>6</sup>

Jesus went up—speaking metaphorically—in order that the Holy Spirit might come down—speaking metaphorically! Jesus passed from being present beside us, so that he might be present within us. We'll hear more about that next Sunday.

*(Walk over to the paschal candle.)*

There used to be an old tradition in the Church, that the Paschal Candle would be extinguished after the reading of the gospel at the Eucharist on Ascension Day. Those old guys really got the idea of absence. But that seems way too literal to us today...and too much of a downer.

The only way you could be true to the theology and pull it off would be, like this: if each person in the congregation lit a personal candle from the paschal candle before it was blown out, representing that the Christ's light now burns within us. *(Light a candle from the paschal candle and give it to the chalice bearer.)*

But wait...didn't we already do this? At the Easter Vigil! Yes, we did do it. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. Alleluia!

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<sup>4</sup> Acts 1.11.

<sup>5</sup> The Right Rev. Mark McDonald, retired bishop of Alaska

<sup>6</sup> John 14.18, 28; 15.26. See also today's reading Acts 1.8 and Eph 4.8.