

A Sermon for Ascension Sunday, Year B  
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## *The Ascension of Jesus.*

Today is the Seventh Sunday of Easter. It's also the Sunday after the Ascension. I imagine that a lot of people didn't know that Thursday was the Feast of the Ascension, the day we hear the story of how the resurrected Jesus departed from his disciples. Now, even though we have a lectionary that dictates which readings will be heard on any given Sunday, on days like today, I'm given the option of choosing between the normal readings for today – that is, the readings for the Seventh Sunday of Easter – or the readings for the Ascension. I chose the latter because, even though the story of the Ascension is one that so-called “modern” Christians have fun disparaging and discounting, there is still some very important stuff contained within it; stuff we still need to hear.

But first things first. The whole point of the story of the Ascension is not about gravity, or the physical location of heaven, or anything like that. And we need to keep in mind that the language employed by the author of our gospel, in describing the Ascension, is metaphorical language, and not literal language. So, if the story of the Ascension is not about what's “up” there, then what's it about? Quite simply, it's about God, and it's about us.

Think about something: even though the Ascension takes place near the end of the Season of Easter, thematically it is most closely related to ... *Anyone? Anyone? ...* Christmas. That's right. At Christmas, the fullness of God was incorporated into the body of Jesus and, at the Ascension, the fullness of humanity was incorporated into the eternal life of God. In other words, all that it means to be God was joined with all that it means to be human. God was joined to man at Christmas; man was joined to God at the Ascension.

It was not the spirit of Jesus, or the essence of Jesus, or the divine nature of Jesus, or the invisible part of Jesus, or the idea of Jesus, or the teachings of Jesus, or anything like that, that ascended to the Father. It was the resurrected body of Jesus: a body that the disciples touched, a body that ate and drank with them, a real, physical, but gloriously restored body; a body that still bore the marks of the crucifixion. This is what ascended. This is what, now and forever, is a living, participating part of God. This whole business of Incarnation, Resurrection, and Ascension changed who God is, and things are different now.

Now, take a moment and think about that; think about what it says about being human. It's very easy for people to second-guess the value of our humanity. Even within the church, we have a long, and off-deserved, reputation for being uncomfortable, or even embarrassed, about much that characterizes being human – things like the reality of our bodies and our appetites, the fact that we are finite, and limited, and that we are all going to die; the painful difficulty we have in relationships; the struggles and setbacks that always seem to be a part of our quest for God; and the power that our feelings and emotions have over us. All of these parts of being human, and so

many others, we frequently treat as less than holy, as somehow divorced from our spiritual and religious lives, and even as bad things we should not have.

The stories of Christmas and Easter, and especially the Ascension, are here to tell us that it is a good thing to be a human being; indeed it is a wonderful and an important and a holy thing to be a human being. It is such an important thing that *God* did it. Even more, the fullness of God now includes what it means to be a human being. The experience, the reality, and the stuff of being a person is so valuable to God that God has made it a part of his own life.

Let's consider an absurd example that might help us understand what this all means. Let's pretend that our faith was based on the belief that all fish had been created in the image of God, and that God came to the waters of the Earth in the body of one particular fish. And that this one special fish, after doing whatever it is that fish do, was reincorporated into the fullness of God. Now, how would that affect our attitude toward fish? It would change it, wouldn't it? We might never go fishing again. Seafood restaurants would be a thing of the past. And, more than likely, we would treat fish differently than we do now.

Well, God did not become a fish. He created fish, but he did not become one. Try to imagine every living thing under the sun. Only one is now eternally a part of God. Imagine how you would treat that creature if it were a fish; and now remember that it is a human being that we're talking about. This is something we need to take very seriously.

Don't get me wrong: I'm not saying that *everything* about humans is wonderful and holy. I know better than that. But I am saying that God has made it very clear that it is a wonderful and holy thing to be a human being. And this is one reason we should treat ourselves, and one another, with care and great respect. The Ascension, the fact that God has brought into Himself one who is fully human, should remind us that every human being is a sacred thing, never to be abused or taken lightly.

This weekend, we are observing Memorial Day, when we remember and celebrate all of those men and women who made sacrifices – sometimes even of their lives – on our behalf. And we *should* be honoring them, but always remembering that God has honored all of us by joining himself to us, and by welcoming us to him.

One final thing the Ascension tell us is that God knows what it is like to be human, because he was one, and because he remembers what it was like to be one. Therefore, when we approach God, with our prayers and concerns and hopes and dreams, it's important to remember that we are dealing with someone who remembers what life is like. God remembers what it's like to hurt and to laugh, to pray and to hunger, to be lost and afraid, to celebrate and to mourn; God remembers what it's like to live and what it's like to die. He knows because he has been there.

Next week, we will be celebrating the Day of Pentecost, when we hear the stories of how, after the Ascension, the Holy Spirit filled the lives of the people of God. This, too, should remind us of

the things we've been talking about. For just as God inhabited the body of Jesus, so too does God's Spirit inhabit our bodies. And just as Jesus, at his Ascension, returned to the fullness of God, so too, one day, shall we.

Let us pray: Grant, Almighty God, that as we believe your only-begotten Son our Lord Jesus Christ to have ascended into heaven, so we may also in heart and mind there ascend, and with him continually dwell; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.