

A Sermon for Ascension Sunday, Year C
May 20, 2007
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The Ascension: There's More To It Than Meets The Eye.

The Bible-readings for today do a good job illustrating the old adage that there's more to life than what meets the eye. For today's Bible-readings focus on the Ascension of Jesus. In the reading from the Acts of the Apostles, we heard: "When [Jesus] had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight." (Acts 1:9) And, in the reading from Luke's gospel, we heard: "While [Jesus] was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven." (Luke 24:51) Now, as I see it, there are three ways we can approach these accounts.

One approach would be to say that the Ascension took place precisely as the Bible describes, or else the Bible would have said something else. And in this regard I'm reminded of a fifteenth century painting by Hans Suess von Kulmbach (see right) which depicts the disciples gathered together in a tight bunch, some standing and others kneeling, all looking upward; and sticking out of the clouds at the top of the painting are a pair of feet.

Another approach would be to make the claim that there's no way the Ascension took place as the Bible described it. As 21st century Christians, we've seen enough pictures of outer space, and watched enough Apollo spacecraft journeys to the moon and back, to know that heaven's not up there. And we're well-enough versed in scientific theories to know that clouds do not carry people away.

At first blush, it seems to me that neither approach is very helpful. The second approach throws out "the baby with the bath water," while the first approach keeps both the baby and the bath water. Neither approach helps us figure out what happened, and neither gives either God or the authors of scripture very much credit.

I said earlier, there is a third approach to these accounts of the Ascension, and it's the one I prefer. It's based upon several indisputable facts. First, the Ascension is recorded in scripture: In in two gospels, Mark and Luke, and in the historical text, the Acts of the Apostles. Second, the Ascension is listed as an event that took place in the life of Jesus by the three creeds that appear in our Prayer Book: That is, the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Creed of Saint Athanasius. Third, many of the early Church Father – for example, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Origen, Cyprian, Augustine of Hippo, and John Chrysostom, to name but a few – make mention of the Ascension of Jesus in their writings. Now, when we



consider these three facts – when we consider the scriptures, the creeds, and the Fathers – right away the first thing we should notice is that nowhere is the Ascension *explained*; it is simply *proclaimed*. Perhaps that's the way it should be, because the accounts of the Ascension were never meant to be scientifically verifiable descriptions of events that have taken place. Rather, they are theological, faith-based reflections. That being the case, we just might get more mileage out of today's readings if we conducted our examination of them as if those accounts were parables – then, we could focus less upon the outward form, and more upon the inward substance.

Now, if we do that, the first thing we'll realize is that, with parables, the message is more important than the medium. And that leads us to ask the very question that all parables direct us towards: What's the message? What's being communicated? Now, we're getting somewhere. And I believe there are six things being communicated, and I'll mention them briefly, and without much explanation.

First, the Ascension *marks the end of the period of limitation*. No longer is Jesus limited by a physical body. Now, he can be present to everyone, and everywhere through the Holy Spirit.

Second, the Ascension *tells us that Jesus has been exalted*. His Ascension takes him – or maybe it's more accurate to say that it returns him – into the presence of God, to sit at God's right hand, and share in the ruling of creation.

Third, the Ascension *signifies that Jesus is our forerunner*. That destination to which our faith assures us that we are going, our faith also assures us that Jesus has already arrived. And, what's more important, God's acceptance of Jesus is the basis of our hope that God will accept us as well.

Fourth, the Ascension *assures us that Jesus continues to have a high priestly ministry*. The high priest's job was to intercede for the people before God. And because Jesus has experienced all that we experience, he is able to fully sympathize with us, and be the very best advocate we could ever hope for.

Fifth, the Ascension *comforts us with the knowledge that Jesus goes to prepare a place for us*. In John's gospel, Jesus said, "There are many rooms in my Father's house. I wouldn't tell you this, unless it was true. I am going there to prepare a place for each of you. After I have done this, I will come back and take you with me. Then we will be together." (John 14:2-3; English Standard Version)

And, sixth, the Ascension *proclaims to the world that Jesus is the head over the Church*.

Now we're getting to some good stuff! And it's a lot of stuff being communicated through what is essentially a very simple story. But we can't get to any of this stuff unless we approach the Ascension on the right path. We won't get to all this good stuff about the

Ascension if we take the first approach – “The Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it” – because, logically, if the premise is faulty (and I personally think it is) then any conclusions are suspect. And we can’t get to the good stuff if we take the second approach – “The Ascension is a scientific impossibility!” – because it discredits the whole account right from the start. In truth, we can only get to the good stuff, to the stuff that really makes a difference in our lives, when we approach the Ascension by way of the third path. For, it is only when we begin our exploration with the words of scripture, and then follow the path that was blazed by the creeds and Church Fathers, that we can find ourselves in a place where, informed by our God-given reason, we can find that treasure trove of information and assurance and promise.

And then, and only then, can we appreciate the fact there is, indeed, more to life than what meets the eye.