

He Ascended into Heaven
II Kings 2:1-14
Luke 24:44-53/Acts 1:1-11

“When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.”

Every Sunday, we stand and say we believe in Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, our Lord, who was, among other things, “crucified, dead and buried...descended into hell...rose again from the dead”--which, by the way, means “rose anew” to answer a question someone asked me not too long ago. Then we go on to confess: “He ascended into heaven....” For the most part, the crucified, dead, and buried part we believe in the dumb sense: believe that these things actually happened to a human being named Jesus in time and space. The descended into hell part, no matter how many sermons I preach on it, escapes our understanding. I would be glad to remind you anew in the narthex what we mean when we confess these words! As for rose again from the dead, even though we may wrestle with what we mean literally when we say this, surely we long to believe the truth of the church’ claim: because he lives, love and not death is the last word spoken over our lives. But then there is the matter of Jesus’ ascension.

This is the Seventh Sunday after Easter, a Sunday when we may or may not do business with the story of Jesus’ ascension because Ascension *Day* was last Thursday, forty days after Easter Sunday, and the lectionary has moved on. In Roman Catholic and Anglican sanctuaries, the Pascal Candle, burning since Easter, has been extinguished to symbolize the end, the completion of Christ’s work of salvation. For reasons that escape me, some churches blessed the first fruits (which are grapes and beans), while others, leaving nothing to the imagination, lifted a statue of Jesus above the altar and pulled him through an opening in the ceiling of the church.

Presbyterians tend, on the other hand, to ignore the whole story. I do not know that I ever heard a sermon on the ascension before I preached my first a few years ago. Yet for John Calvin, the doctrine of the Ascension was critical to a Reformed understanding of the life and mission of the church. Jesus’ disappearance from the daily lives of the disciples marked the end of his earthly existence and the beginning of a new sort of time, a time when “Christ’s relationship with the Church is not restricted by the boundaries of time and space. Christ is now available to all people all of the time,” my friend and colleague John McClure wrote, “through the work of the Holy Spirit.” At first glance, the doctrine could easily be used to underwrite the “spiritual but not religious” inclination of millennials. If the Spirit is everywhere available to everyone, who needs the church? But for Calvin, the ascension marked the culmination of Christ’s work and the beginning of the Church’s work: of her active waiting on the Spirit and proclamation of the gospel in a world that is desperately in need of good news.

What does the Ascension mean and what does that matter for our life together as Christ’s Church? I know this is not a question you woke up asking yourself this morning. More likely you can imagine asking what the disciples must have asked when they woke on Easter morning. How could they go on, now that Jesus was gone? In the same dumb sense that we understand final endings, they understood the crucified, dead and buried part of what had happened.

But what of their coming to understand “on the third day he rose again” part? Luke’s extended account of Easter Sunday invites us to imagine how it was that Jesus’ appearance early in the morning, throughout that day, and into the night, slowly led the disciples, in Luke’s words, “to believe not for joy.” He walked with them, talked with them, broke bread with them, and ate with them. In other words, he was alive. Yet he also moved through locked doors and vanished as mysteriously as he appeared. As the day wore on, what sense did they make of these experiences? Did they began to think that things would return to the way they were before Jesus’ death? Or maybe they thought they were living in that split second reality we all have known when, in the face of some loss beyond our control, we wake forgetting.

That is why, it seems to me, Jesus’ teaching is more important than his walking or talking or eating with them on that day. He “opened their minds to understand the scriptures,” Luke says, first on the Emmaus road and then in the upper room, tracing God’s purposes through the law of Moses, the prophets and the psalms that had to be fulfilled in his suffering and rising from the dead on the third day. But more. His impending ascension surely constrained him to open the Scriptures in search of a story that would help them understand his leave-taking all over again. In Luke’s Gospel, he has only hours to do this. There his ascension is like the shock of pain you knew

when your mother ripped the band aid off, leaving you to get on with your life, your wound exposed for all the world to see.

According to Acts, also written by Luke, Jesus had forty days to peel himself away from their dependence, forty days for faith to in the living Lord to set in. Forty days is a device, some say, to return us to a multitude of stories in Scripture that illumine this story: forty days of rain in the time of Noah (we were beginning to know how that felt!); forty days for the spies to scout out Canaan; Nineveh had forty days to repent or else; Jesus was tempted in the wilderness for forty days. Forty days would seem to be the time it takes in these stories for the past to be past and the future to break in. So while, in fact, Jesus may never have appeared again after the evening of the day he was raised from the dead, it took a good forty days for the disciples to let go of the hope that they would run into him around the next corner; forty days for them to accept, in Karl Barth's words, the fact that he had left their earthly space, left "the space... which is conceivable to us and which He has sought out for our sakes. [Forty days to understand that] he no longer belongs to [space] as we belong to it"; and forty days to believe that he was now present *to* time and space, but in a way wholly different from the way he was present *in* time and space.

In order to open their minds to the meaning of his departure, I imagine Jesus turning to the story of Elijah's departure. Elijah, you will remember, is the prophet who met God not in wind or earthquake or fire, but after the sound of sheer silence. Now he is about to be "taken up" to heaven, his mantle placed on the shoulders of Elisha. Yet Elisha's prophetic vocation will be nothing without Elijah's spirit, without the gift of the power to discern God's presence and purpose in the midst of human history. Knowing that his teacher is about to depart, Elisha requests a double share of Elijah's spirit. "You have asked a hard thing," Elijah says, "yet if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not." Elisha keeps his eyes on the one who taught him—his words, his deeds, his witness—as he is taken up into heaven. Then, once he is out of sight, Elisha picks up Elijah's mantle (as Joshua picked up the mantle of Moses), parts the waters of the Jordan, and returns to the people wearing the authority and responsibility given to prophets: to speak truth to power, to unmask idolatry, to require justice—until Elijah comes again!

In the few hours he had left to dwell with them in space and time, I can only guess that this is the story Jesus told them through the lens of his own departure. Or if not, surely it was the story Luke had in mind as he set down for Theophilus all the things that Jesus did and taught until the day of his departure. Like Elisha, their teacher was about to be taken up to the heavens; like Elisha, the disciples kept their eyes on Jesus until they could see him no more. Like Elisha, they would be given the Spirit. And like Elisha, they would wear the mantle of their teacher, the Spirit bestowing on them the authority and responsibility to proclaim repentance for the forgiveness of sins until Jesus returns.

But unlike Elisha, their teacher had death behind him. Their lives and the life of the church would not be a continuation of his work, because his work had been completed, the reconciliation between God and humanity fully accomplished in him, with nothing, not even death, ever again able to separate all of creation from the love that God is. Still, he was gone from their sight. Barth says, of the time following Jesus' ascension, that it is "the time of the abandonment and, in a certain respect, of the loneliness of the church on earth. It is the time in which the Church is united with Christ only in faith and by the Holy Spirit; it is the interim time between His earthly existence and His return in glory... [and yet it is the time] that leaves room for hearing, believing and repenting, for proclaiming and comprehending."

That is to say, the sort of life with Christ we are given by the Holy Spirit after the ascension is life together. We gather for worship, sing God's praises, listen for God's address, baptize and teach our children, study and wrestle with the biblical narrative, confess our failures to one another and our little faith, dare to say what we believe and what we doubt, enjoy God and one another, mine the faith of those who have gone before us for all that its worth—Christ's ascension has left us room for these things, left room for the church, in the first place.

Then in the second place, at his ascension Christ challenges and commands the church: you will be my witnesses, he says, proclaiming repentance for the forgiveness of sins in my name to all nations. "The conclusion of Christ's work [therefore] is... not an opportunity given to the Apostles for idleness, but it is their being sent out into the world. Here there is no rest possible; here there is rather a running and racing; here there is the start of the mission, the sending of the Church into the world and for the world," Barth proclaims. More about that next Sunday!

Though finally, the hope of Christ's ascension, especially after this week, is that our lives are finally not in the hands of those who promise a future fueled by human fears and hatred; our lives are in the hand of him who now sits on God's right hand, making intercession for us. Our lives are seen whole by him who is present to us everywhere. He sees us from eternity, from beginning to end, because our humanity, broken and longing to be made whole, has been taken up by Christ into the love that God is.

"Can Ascension/not have been/arduous, almost," poet Denise Levertov asks,

As the return
from Sheol, and
back through the tomb
into breath?
Matter reanimate
now must relinquish
itself, its
human cells,
molecules, five
senses, linear
visions endured
as Man—
the sole
all-encompassing gaze
resumed now.
Eye of Eternity.
Relinquished, earth's
broken Eden.
Expulsion,
liberation,
last
self-enjoined task
of Incarnation.
He again
Fathering Himself.
Seed-case
splitting,
He again
Mothering His birth:
torture and bliss.

He ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty! Alleluia! Amen.