

Acts 1:1-11
Psalm 93
Ephesians 1:15-23
Luke 24:44-53

The Feast of the Ascension B
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island
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Today we're celebrating the feast of the Ascension. Ascension Day was actually on Thursday – did you mark it? Likely not. Ascension Day is a major feast day in the church, yet many churches won't celebrate it at all. I had Bible study conversations about the ascension with two different groups of people this past week. I opened both conversations asking people to talk about why the ascension mattered, or how it had meaning for them. There was a lot of silence. A couple of people had thoughts right away – *We can't fully enter in to our own calling until the "teacher" leaves¹...* and *Christ becomes universal in the ascension.²* Both stunning responses! The rest of us got there eventually, but it took some work.

If you ask people what the most important principle of the Christian faith is, most will say either incarnation or resurrection – Christmas or Easter. Christmas and Easter are most of what's left of Christianity in popular culture. But even as practicing Christians, whether we fall on the side of incarnation or we fall on the side of resurrection, we're likely not going to fall on the side of the ascension.

Jesus didn't talk a whole lot about the ascension either. He did say over and over again that he would suffer, be killed and three days later, rise from the dead. He did not, however, follow up with "and forty days after that, I will ascend to the Father." Even in today's gospel, the gospel appointed for Ascension Day, Jesus reminds the disciples that the scriptures will be fulfilled, saying "*Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day...*" While the disciples bear witness to the ascension in the first chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, we don't hear a word from Jesus about the ascension. Perhaps that's why we've not given much attention to Ascension Day. Perhaps that's why we don't quite know what to think about it.

And yet we speak of the ascension every single Sunday when we speak the words of the Nicene Creed. *For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.* But that doesn't help much either. Imagining Jesus sitting in his chair next to God the Father sitting in his chair, doesn't help me to make meaning of the ascension. But there is a clue there. If you listen carefully to the tenses in the creeds, you'll hear everything up to the

¹ Pat Speidel

² Kirk Eichenberger

ascension in the past-tense. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

It is the ascension, not the birth, death or even resurrection that brings Jesus into the present tense. When Jesus was born and God became one of us, humankind became God's chosen dwelling place. When Jesus suffered and was killed, God chose to experience the fullness of humanity with all the suffering that comes with it. When Jesus was resurrected, God exalted him and made his life eternal. And when Jesus ascended, he made our lives eternal.

While asking where Jesus went when he ascended into heaven is a very natural question, it is perhaps not the most helpful question. A better question might be where is Jesus present in his absence?

When my mother died and my sister and I were working through our grief, Becky asked me "Where is she?" I don't know that she was really expecting an answer from me, but the question seemed very important. Where do we actually go when we die? I can only think that we go from being in the particular places our earthly lives have taken us, to being divine presence everywhere. That's what happened when Jesus ascended to the Father. He went from being in Nazareth and Bethany and Capernaum to being everywhere present... present in the world in a whole new way.

Jesus talked about this once, that I can remember. It was Easter morning and Mary Magdalene was alone at the tomb. She'd found the tomb empty earlier that day and had gone to tell the other disciples about it. A couple of them returned with her, but they'd seen everything there was to see and had gone home. Mary stayed. She was heartsick, weeping, wanting desperately to find the body of her beloved teacher. When someone she supposed was the gardener appeared, she said to him *'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.'*³ When Jesus spoke her name and she realized who he was, he said to her, *'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."*⁴

It's hard to understand why Jesus said those things. For the longest time, those words seemed a very strange response, one that I could not make sense of. But they are profoundly important words, the first words Jesus said after his resurrection. Don't try to hold on to me. If you try to hold on to me, you really will lose me. I am trying to make a way to be with you forever and for you to be with me forever. That is not something that can happen if I stay in this particular place or time. That is only something that can happen if I ascend to the Father.

³ John 20:15

⁴ John 20:17

He had tried to describe this to the 12 just a few days earlier, on the night before he died. He said *'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.'*⁵

If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?

When Jesus ascended, he went to prepare a place for us. And because Jesus did die, did rise again, did ascend to the Father, did go to make a place for us, we have eternal in the heavens, a place just for us. In the incarnation, Jesus entered into our humanity. In the crucifixion, Jesus suffered all that we suffer. In the resurrection, Jesus had eternal life. In his ascension, he made our lives eternal. Do you see? When Jesus ascended to the Father, he completed the circle of the incarnation and made not just a place, but a way for us to return to the Father. Resurrection means that Jesus is alive forever. And in the Ascension Jesus made a way for us to be alive forever too. *I go to prepare a place for you so that where I am, you may be also.* So when we die, we have an eternal place in the heavens too. When we die, we too will be everywhere present. Just as we know Jesus to be ever-present with us, because of the ascension, when we die, our beloveds will know us to be ever-present too.

Just before he led them out as far as Bethany, before he blessed them and left them, Jesus reminded his disciples of all the ways the scriptures foretold his life, death and resurrection and reminded them that they were witnesses of it all, and that they were to bear witness to it all. Those words are as alive today as they were when Jesus spoke them, meant as much for us as they were for the 12. Jesus Christ became universal in the ascension and the church universal is the bearer of Christ in the world today, making Jesus everywhere present. When the teacher left, he called us to live fully into our calling.

So whether you believe that Jesus is coming again one day, or you believe that Jesus comes over and over again every day, Christ alive in us now is how God is transforming the world and bringing God's kingdom to fullness. Amen.

⁵ John 14:1-4