

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

Ascension B  
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island  
May 12, 2024  
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Today we're celebrating the feast of the Ascension. Ascension Day was actually on Thursday – did you know that? Probably not. Ascension Day is a major feast day in the church, yet many churches don't celebrate it at all. Today we enter the last week of Easter, a season that is sometimes called the Great 50 days. But Ascension Day, the day Jesus ascended into heaven to be seated at the right hand of the Father, comes forty days after the resurrection, not fifty. Forty is a number that comes up a lot in scripture, in both the Old Testament and the New. When we hear the number forty, whether it's forty days and forty nights or forty long years, we know we are in a time of transition, and those times of transition involve preparation and purification.

In the flood, God wiped out a world of sin and brought Noah and his family into a new world with a new covenant. The time aboard the ark was a time for them to deepen their faith, to purify their consciences and prepare for a new way of life. In the Exodus, the Israelites spent forty years in the wilderness, learning to rely completely on God, and transitioning from the slavery of Egypt to freedom in the promised land. When Jesus spent forty days and forty nights in the wilderness, he too relied completely on the Father as he prepared for his work in the world, transitioning from private life into the life of public ministry. And in these days, the forty days between the resurrection and the ascension, Jesus prepared his disciples for his departure, bringing them more deeply into relationship with him and helping them to understand that once he was gone, they would be the ones to bring God's kingdom to bear. *"Will you bring the Kingdom of God now, before you go, Jesus?" "No," he told them. "You stay in Jerusalem and wait for the promise of the Father, the Holy Spirit."* Acts 1:4-5 He was clarifying, purifying if you will, their understanding of how God's Kingdom would come. Not in a last miraculous act by Jesus, but by them, through the work of the Holy Spirit. Preparation, purification, transition.<sup>1</sup>

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 do much talking about the ascension. Oh, 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 Luke's gospel today, 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..."* Luke 24:46. While the disciples

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<sup>1</sup>Dr. Brian Pitre, accessed 5/11/24 <https://youtu.be/YCfXUauicic>

bear witness to the ascension in our reading from Acts this morning, we don't hear a word from Jesus about the ascension. Maybe that's why we haven't paid much attention to Ascension Day. Maybe that's why we don't quite know what to think about it.

We do mention the ascension every single Sunday when we say 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 on his chair next to God the Father sitting on 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 creed, you'll hear everything up to the 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.*

Do you see? 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 experienced the fullness of humanity and 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 too.

While we may be inclined to ask where Jesus went when he ascended into heaven, I think a better question might be, *Where is Jesus present in his absence?* When my mom died and my sister and I were working through our grief, Becky asked me "Where is she?" I think she was wondering aloud rather than expecting an answer from me, but I still remember the question, and the question still seems very important. Where do we go when we die? I can only think that we go from being in the particular places we spend our earthly lives, 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.'* John 20:15. 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.'"* John 20:17. It's hard to understand why Jesus said those things, and it's taken me a very long time to make sense of them. 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 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.

He had tried to describe this to the disciples 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.'* John 14:1-4 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."* John 14:4 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. He reminded them that they were witnesses of all of it and that they were to bear witness to all of it. Those words are as alive today as they were when Jesus spoke them, meant as much for us as they were for the first disciples. Jesus Christ became universal in the ascension and today, the church universal is the presence of Christ in the world.

It was only by leaving that Jesus could invite us fully into our calling to be the heart and hands of Christ in the world. So whether you believe that Jesus is coming again one day, or you believe that Jesus comes again and again and again every day, Christ alive in us now, is how God is transforming the world, preparing, purifying and transitioning our earthly kingdom, to God's kingdom, heaven come to earth. Amen