

Easter 6B: Feast of the Ascension
The Rev. W. Terry Miller
Church of the Good Shepherd
May 5, 2023

Mending the Tear

A few years ago, I got hooked on audiobooks. These are what used to be known as “books on tape,” only now they’re on your smartphone. Using the audiobook app, I get to read all the time—when I’m driving or working in the yard or cooking dinner. One thing I immediately noticed with audiobooks, though, is you often end up stopping at odd junctures. I reach my destination or finish a chore and I hit “pause”, regardless of where it is in the narration. This differs from reading a physical book, where typically a more natural ending exists, the end of the chapter or the end of a section. But with audiobooks, the break might come at a key moment. I remember listening to the book *Ready Player One*. I pulled up to our house right when the protagonist said, “and then we all died.” An inconvenient time to stop the story, to be sure.

The same thing can happen when we summarize the story of the Scriptures. We can hit the pause button on the story of God’s works before key events occur. Usually when I hear other Christians give a summary of the gospel, they speak about Jesus’ death and resurrection. Rarely do I hear a whisper about Jesus’ ascension. And yet from the earliest days, the Church’s retelling of Christ’s life included three critical events—crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension into heaven.

So important was the third event that St. Augustine of Hippo declared: “The Ascension is the feast day which confirms the grace of all the other feast days put together, without which the profitability of every other feast day would have perished. For, unless the Savior had ascended to heaven, his nativity would have come to nothing . . . and his passion would have born no fruit for us . . . and his most holy resurrection would have been useless.” That’s quite a bold claim, considering that most Christians don’t even know about the ascension, let alone celebrate it! Yet, to Augustine’s thinking, Ascension Day was more important than Good Friday, Easter, even Christmas!

Why is it then that the ascension has so decisively dropped off the radar for most Christians today? Why in our recounting of the Christian story do we hit “pause” after the resurrection and never pick up the rest of the story? Well, there are a number of reasons, I reckon.

There’s the fact that the Ascension is took place and so is *commemorated on a Thursday*, which is not a day that most Christians are accustomed to coming to church. At the same time, *the Bible doesn’t say much about it*. Of all the Gospel writers, Luke is the only one who narrates the event—at the end of his Gospel and again at the beginning the Acts of the Apostles. Christ’s exaltation to God’s right hand is referenced elsewhere, but not described. And we have to admit, so far as miracles go, the *ascension is, well, odd*. Jesus starts levitating before the disciples, rising like a balloon into the sky until he’s out of sight. Is this some parlor trick? Or is Jesus being beamed up by a space ship? Even depictions of the event in art, Jesus’ feet hanging down out of the clouds, are a little comical.

The resurrection makes a lot more sense. I mean, it's still miraculous, but we can understand it: Jesus died but was made alive again, seemingly restored to the way he was before. Of course, there's more to it than that, but the New Testament writers take pains to explain what it means for us: because Jesus was raised from the dead, we have hope to be raised to new life on the Last Day. But this only compounds the issue. For, in holding up Easter as *the* pivotal, world-changing event in history (which it is), we often treat everything that comes after it as unimportant. And that includes the ascension. What glory his exaltation to heaven adds to Christ's victory seems unnecessary, superfluous, little more than a dazzling exclamation point for the resurrection. So that's another reason we neglect the ascension—*next to Easter, it doesn't seem all that important.*

But even if we allow for its strangeness, even if we accept that the Ascension is a separate event from the Resurrection, a bigger problem remains—*we still aren't quite sure what to do with it.* Even though Luke sees it as important enough a story to narrate—*twice*—he doesn't give us much guidance, much in the way of a theological explanation of what happened. He just says, Jesus was “carried up into heaven.” And so we are left standing alongside the disciples, staring into heaven with confused looks on our faces. What was *that* about?

And yet that is precisely the issue: What *is* the Ascension about? *Not*, What actually happened? That's what we Western, scientifically-minded people often get hung-up on—trying to figure out how Jesus taking off like Superman fits into what we know about astronomy and Newtonian physics. To the first believers, what “actually happened” that day was a mystery to them, just as it is to us. Rather, what they were concerned about was what it means. What does it mean that Jesus was “taken up into heaven”? Where did he go?

It might seem like the answer should be obvious, but it's actually not clear. Colloquially speaking, a lot of us think of heaven as being “up there,” above our heads, in the sky...well, maybe not literally. Still, we picture the ascension as Jesus drifting up over our heads. The early Christians, though, would not have been so literal in their thinking. When they spoke of *up* and *down*, they weren't thinking in terms of spatial directions or distance from the earth. Rather they were using symbols, metaphors, that were so obvious to them they didn't need spelling out.

To see what I mean, consider how we ourselves talk of a student *moving up* a grade or a vice chairman *moving up* to be chairman of the board. These moves might in fact involve relocating to a place that is a few feet further above ground, but that physical move is beside the point. The point is that they have graduated, stepped up, been raised up to greater importance, authority, and responsibility. They are now working at a “higher” level, we might say, operating on a “higher” plane within the organization.

In the same way, Jesus' being “taken up into heaven” is not about his physical elevation but rather his attaining a higher level, existing at a “higher” or “superior” order of existence. That is to say, Jesus *ascends* from the earth in order to *transcend* it, to expand, enlarge, extend the work he did during his time on earth to encompass all of creation, heaven and earth.

So, it's not that heaven is a place physically above the earth, as one floor is above another in a high-rise. Heaven and earth are rather two dimensions of God's creation, two levels of existence, two ways of being in the same space. Now, this talk of different “dimensions” may strike us as

odd, but there are a lot of books, TV shows and movies these days that play with the idea of alternate dimensions and parallel worlds. A world where the Nazis won World War II, or where 9/11 never happened or where human evolution took a different turn and humans all now have long rubbery fingers. Theoretical physicists and science fiction writers imagine there might be an infinite number of alternate realities that exist, right next to ours, with varying degrees of difference from our own.

The thing about these fictional accounts of dimensions is that interactions between the different dimensions tend to be rare. Yet Scripture portrays heaven and earth as close realities. They were made together at creation, as flipsides of the same coin, a spiritual realm and a material realm. And they are related to each other. There is communication between them. They touch. Indeed, the Bible is full of stories of angels coming down, God speaking his word from mountaintops, holy men performing miracles like healings and holding back the sea, God providing manna and quail in the desert. Even something as seemingly mundane as rain and fertility can be understood as heavenly blessings brought to earth.

In other words, there is regular traffic between heaven and earth. Though, in truth, most of this traffic has been one-way. God coming down or communicating with those of us here on earth. But in Jesus something new happened. At Jesus' Incarnation, God himself came down from heaven to earth and united himself to humanity. Then throughout his life and ministry, heaven would regularly break in, manifest in his miracles and healings. Jesus describes them as such at the beginning of John's Gospel: "You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." The rest of John's Gospel consists of just this: accounts of various "signs," signs of heaven, heaven opened up, angels ascending and descending. Like a sewing machine, up and down, up and down, penetrating our world, creating moments where heaven is manifest, right here and now. Then, to cap it all off, God takes Jesus in his body, and with it all of humanity, all of material existence, and draws them up into heaven.

The image I get of God's actions in our world is that of God as a seamstress or tailor working with a garment that's been torn. God takes a needle and thread and draws the needle *from heaven to earth*—the Incarnation, God becoming human. And then with each of Jesus' miracles, each prayer, each oracle, God makes another stitch, and another and another. He then makes special knot at the crucifixion, tying off a nasty tear with the resurrection. Finally at the Ascension the needle is drawn one final time, this time from earth back up into heaven. And with that, God stitches up the torn garment, uniting them together stronger than ever. All that is left is for Jesus to return one last time, when he will pull taut the thread, drawing heaven and earth together forever. And the sea, the chasm, the rupture between heaven and earth will be no more (Rev 21:1).

And so we live now between that last stitch and the final drawing together, we live in a world that is interpenetrated with heaven. God has made holes with his needle through which we can see glimpses of heaven, and the stitches he's made hold heaven and earth together and draw us upward to heaven.

Now, talk like that may strike some as overly poetic, but we are talking about things beyond our comprehension, realities our language simply cannot convey. And so we turn to symbols and

metaphors, such as “being taken up into heaven” or “God sewing heaven and earth together” in order to make sense of those instances, those sacred moments, when something otherworldly, something heavenly peeks through on earth. Such moments are more common than we think. The birth of a child, sitting with a loved one as they take their last breath, the taking of communion, being baptized, hearing God’s voice in Scripture, falling in love, experiencing beautiful music or art that transports you a higher realm, the feeling of awe and wonder at a flower or cloud or mountain vista. Such moments are sacred moments, instances of heaven breaking into earth, God manifesting his glory to us. God has been doing this throughout history, and continues to do so today, making heaven real in our world, in our time, in our lives. The ascension then testifies to the fact that this has been God’s aim all along—to bring heaven and earth back together again.

The ascension means more than that, of course. And over the next few weeks we will be exploring some of the other implications of Jesus’ ascent to heaven, to sit on the throne at God’s right hand. But right now it’s enough to appreciate how the ascension not only completes Christ’s work but reveals God’s larger aim—the union of heaven and earth.

So we see, St. Augustine was right. The story of Jesus’ work doesn’t make sense without the ascension. That Jesus was resurrected doesn’t mean much if he is not also elevated to heaven to rule over all. The Ascension completes that arc. The Ascension is like the follow-through in golf. If you don’t have good follow-through, your stroke will be off, stunted, incomplete. It’s the same for the Ascension. Without it, our Good News is truncated. Without it, other doctrines become misaligned. Without it, Jesus remains a man who came back from the dead. The Ascension completes Christ’s work, ties it all together.

And so today we stand with the apostles *looking up*, but we are also *looking forward*, grateful and expecting to see more instances, more signs of God bringing heaven and earth closer together, and that that union will be realized, seen by all, in the end. And for that we say, Thanks be to God!