

## THE ASCENSION OF CHRIST

“While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven.”

Luke 24: 51

“After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their site.”

Acts 1: 9

Many of you know that my wife Elizabeth and I have led several tours to the Holy Land. Sometimes we have been asked, why go back to the same places, suggesting that we might get tired of the repetition? Part of the answer lies in the religious significance of the region. But part of it is also the fact that no two tours have been exactly the same. Even going back to the same sights we have often learned something new, or observed things that we may have missed before. The guides have their own way of presenting the various sites and often with a different perspective. It is also interesting to see how the countryside has changed over the years. Some areas that were little more than desert wastelands when we first visited have now become productive fields and the source of newfound wealth when the produce is shipped to other countries.

The same process is at work when we revisit certain passages of Scripture, or explore Biblical stories we may have heard many times over throughout our lives. One such story is the Ascension. For many Protestants this has been a neglected part of the Easter drama. It is filled with a number of problems that are hard to square with our advanced knowledge of the Universe, but that is not sufficient reason to ignore it.

As Luke tells the story he does so using the categories of language that were available to him in the first Century. Likewise, he was influenced by an accepted view that the world was flat and heaven was up somewhere in the vast regions of space.

He touches on it at the end of his Gospel simply noting that “while Jesus was blessing (the disciples) he left them and was taken up into Heaven.” In Acts he adds a few more details. There he says: “After he said this, he (meaning Jesus) was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. Then he says: “They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them” to assure that the Jesus who was going away from them would ultimately return.

What are we to make of this story? Is it an integral part of the gospel or something that we might well discard as being of no great consequence? In reality, there are actually very few references to the ascension in the Bible. Matthew doesn't mention it at all. Mark speaks of Jesus being “taken up into heaven” - but he gives no details. And that in in a passage of disputed origin.

In John there is an indirect reference where Jesus tells the disciples he must go away, but that's about it.

When Paul lists the resurrection appearances of Jesus in I Corinthians 15 he makes no mention of the ascension at all. It's only in Luke's gospel and the Book of Acts that the event is explicitly described, both coming from the same author. This doctrine then presents us with some difficulties. But, given the fact it was included in the Apostles' Creed it is something we must take seriously. It may not fit in with our view of the universe but it contains theological truths that we need to consider.

Whatever else we might say about the ascension, we must note that it marks the end of Jesus' ministry upon the earth.

If we think of the ministry of Jesus as a drama, the ascension is like the closing of the curtains at the end of an act. There is more to come, but for now this part of the story is complete, so the curtains close to let you know it. From this time forward Jesus would no longer interact with his followers in a physical way. He would still be available but in a completely different way. The Ascension marks this transition. It signals a significant change in the relationship he would have, not just with the disciples, but with all who would respond to their witness.

As much as the ascension marks the end of something significant it also announces for a beginning.

Luke tells us that when Jesus met with the disciples their first impulse was to ask him a question about the kingdom of God. Throughout his ministry Jesus talked many times about this kingdom. Many of his parables begin: “The kingdom of God is like.....a man who went out to sow, or like a man who went into a far country, or a treasure hidden in a field.” Even in the Lord’s Prayer there is a phrase that anticipates the coming of the kingdom. The problem the disciples had was their failure to understand what Jesus really meant. Initially they saw the kingdom in terms of political power and domination, rather than a new society where God’s will “is perfectly done as it is in heaven.” When they met with Jesus at Bethany, their thoughts immediately turned to this theme. “Lord will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?”

It’s interesting to see what Jesus does with their question. He doesn’t so much answer it as correct it. “It is not for you to know the times or the

seasons, which the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you: and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.”

Jesus shifts the focus from the future to the present. The future is speculation. The present demands action. When things are difficult, some people either retreat into the past get lost in their dreams about the future. The past is often glorified and by selective memory and made to appear better than it really was. The future becomes a fantasy that has everything good about it. Some people in their struggle to make a living do that when they buy lottery tickets. They know the odds are stacked against their winning, but they buy the tickets anyway - just in case. They say: “somebody’s going to win the big prize, and it just might just be me.”

Jesus seems to be saying that it’s not the golden days of the past, nor the dreamy eyed possibilities of the future, that’s important - but the present. Be witnesses to me, he said and “begin here and now. Don’t get lost in the past that you cannot repeat, and don’t be preoccupied with a future that may not measure up to your dreams; concentrate your efforts on the present and do what needs to be done here and now.”

There’s no benefit in bemoaning what has taken place in the past, and there’s no point in fantasizing about a future that may never come to pass. What’s needed is the transformation of the present through the witness we give to Christ. That was the task Jesus set for the disciples, and it’s the primary task that faces the church today.

The Ascension does something else. It gives us the assurance that we are not alone. We have the promise of Christ's presence in the form of the Holy Spirit.

There are some amazing stories told about what people have accomplished when convinced of that reality. We have the stories of the disciples, of course, and how their lives were transformed through their experience in the upper room. On the night of Jesus' arrest we are told that all the disciples fled in fear. On the day of Pentecost they went out into the streets of Jerusalem to proclaim Jesus as the Saviour and Messiah. The great leaders of the church down through the ages were also motivated by their conviction that Christ stood with them - often in the face of great misunderstanding and opposition. Lest you think such motivation is reserved for the saints of the church hear this story that comes from the running of the New York Marathon in the 1990's.

It is the story of Linda Down who discovered real power when she needed it most. She suffered from cerebral palsy all her life and struggled with the limitations it placed upon her. One day, she got the notion that she could and should run the New York Marathon. But Linda walked with difficulty - running seemed out of the question? She used two canes with arm clamps to steady her arms. On top of this she was 25 pounds overweight and jobless. In a state of depression, she began reading in the scriptures about the power of God at work in people's lives.

She read Phil. 4:13, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." While training, she listened for God. She thought as she was running in the dark at night: "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction about things not seen" (Heb. 11:1) She thought about her limited dreams, her inability to see beyond the obstacles of life. Faith, she said to herself, was running in spite of obstacles that seemed insurmountable.

As the NY Marathon began on a cold morning, she set out wearing gloves on her hands to soften the impact of the crutches. It was windy on the Verrazano Narrows Bridge. To make it even more difficult it was uphill. She had not expected the beginning to be so hard. When she finished crossing the mile-long Bridge, there were no runners in sight ahead of her. Spectators were thinning out as well. But one little girl ran out into the street and cheered her on, "You can do it," she said. Others on the curb also applauded and shouted. They brought tears to Linda's eyes but their encouragement helped her to keep going.

Ten hours later Linda was still "running," now in the dark, and through some of the seedier neighbourhoods of New York. Some admiring spectators walked with her for safety.

Then a TV camera crew showed up and followed the story of her courage. She continued to press on. She wore a hole in one sneaker from dragging it across the ground; her hands ached and throbbed; her arms became black and blue and swollen; she couldn't speak to anyone because of fatigue, but she continued on remembering the words of Paul: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me...I can do all things."

Then two parks and recreation trucks came by and stayed with her to light the way. After 11 hours of struggle Linda finally crossed the finish line. People were crying – including the TV crew covering the story. Linda was crying at the response and support she had received from God and these people. She thanked God for the power to achieve her goal. Later she was invited to the White House. Her picture appeared on the front page of the New York Times. Her story was not just a story of human courage and a noble effort. It was the story of the power of God at work in a life convinced that God was with her giving her the strength to endure.

This is an important part of the story of Christ's ascension. Yes, Jesus went away. That was necessary to mark the end of his physical ministry upon the earth. But by doing so he became available in a brand new way to give courage and strength to his followers so they in turn can engage in his ministry. The disciples went forth, not in the strength of their own abilities, but with the inner conviction that what Christ was to them he would also be to others who would believe because of their testimony.

There is one more comment that needs to be made regarding the ascension. And that is to comment on the cloud that received him.

At first glance you might think that Jesus just disappeared into a misty cloud that descended upon the Mount of Olives that day. Some artistic presentations of the ascension suggest that this was the case. But there is more. Remember it was a cloud that descended upon the Tabernacle when it was first dedicated. A cloud filled the temple of Solomon when it was first used. It was a cloud that enveloped Jesus, Moses and Elijah when they met on the mount of transfiguration. The cloud is really a symbol of the divine presence. In the story of the ascension it represents Jesus returning to the Father as he had said he would, so he could be more readily present among his people and with his church than would have been possible had he remained in a physical body.

That presence is also our focus in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper – the bread and wine are symbols of his sacrifice upon the cross but also reminders of his continuing presence with us.

When all is said and done the Ascension still remains a mystery. It attempts to put into words what is beyond words to describe. But it is still an important part of the story of Jesus and leads us into an even

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deeper understanding of God's grace made available in all he has done for us.

Praise and glory be to his name, this day and every day. AMEN