

## IGNORE IT AT YOUR PERIL

**Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo  
Union Church of Pocantico Hills  
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Luke 24:44-53

Acts 1:1-11

Last Thursday, the fortieth day after Easter Sunday, the church calendar called for the observance of the Ascension of our Lord. Ascension Day marks the events described in this morning's readings from Luke's gospel and the book of Acts, when the risen Christ was physically "lifted up" into the clouds and "taken into heaven." Those of us who grew up with moon walks and space stations often have trouble taking the Ascension seriously. The literal ascent of a body unaided by any kind of extraneous power is really too silly to contemplate. We are too sophisticated to deal with this subject, so we choose to ignore it—to our peril, I would argue. The symbol of the Ascension is something we need to recover and reclaim if we are to remain faithful followers of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Of course, the literal belief in the Ascension as space travel without a space ship is problematic. I remember confronting that fact when a joker in my high school Bible class—a scientifically oriented kid—asked the teacher, "How far do you suppose Jesus has traveled since the Ascension? If we assume that he is traveling at the speed of light, hasn't he only reached the far ends of our Galaxy, The Milky Way, in all this time?" I think the teacher sensed this fellow was more interested in asking his question than in getting an answer, so he turned it around and asked the whole class, "What do you think?" Not surprisingly, the majority of the class agreed that heaven must be far off indeed, and after a while we began to talk more about symbols and their importance and power.

Once I got to seminary, I learned more about the context in which these stories that my young friend had questioned had originally been told. Yes, the biblical understanding of the physical universe was very different from ours. Two thousand years ago, they really thought that the heavens were not too far up and that people could be taken up there. Jesus was not the first biblical character to be taken up; there was Enoch in the book of Genesis who never tasted death,<sup>1</sup> and of course there was the Old Testament prophet Elijah who ascended on a chariot of fire.<sup>2</sup> So when people in Jesus' time heard the story of the Ascension for the first time, they were not as skeptical as we are, nor did they wonder how far "up" Jesus had to go. It was generally accepted that the cosmos was like a three-story building. Heaven was a realm behind the visible sky where the sun, moon and stars had been placed by God pretty much the same way one would place light bulbs strategically on the ceiling. This heavenly canopy had windows which God opened at will to let the rain water the earth, that second story of the universe where people, plants and animals existed. Finally, there was the nether world where the negative

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 5:24.

<sup>2</sup> 2 Kings 2:11.

spiritual forces dwelled. These demons were permitted to go up to the earthly part of the universe to tempt and bother humans who could always pray for angels to come to their assistance and help them overcome the temptations presented by Satan and his hosts.

It is easy to see that with this world vision, the Ascension of Jesus did not present the same problems for first-century adults as it presented to teenagers growing up in the early era of space exploration in the 1960s. But a purely scientific reaction to the story might lead young people or even us today to dismiss its deeper and eternal truths. I believe that we must retain and encourage the annual observance of the Ascension because it is primarily a story that invites us to explore other dimensions of life. The power of this story is not in the details that confound us but in the message that transforms us. This is a story that urges us to expand our horizons and widen our perspectives.

The young man who asked the embarrassing question in my Bible class in 1968 was in great company. Despite its superficial scientific sophistication, his question was in fact narrow and parochial—in fact, much like the question the disciples asked Jesus a few minutes before he was to ascend. And these disciples had already seen the power of God manifested in Christ through the resurrection! And they had the benefit of having walked with him and listened to his preaching and witnessed his miracles and heard him speak of a Kingdom not like the ones in this world. So what do they ask? “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” This is as parochial and ethnocentric as you can get. Jesus basically ignores the question by reminding them that God is the only one who knows the times and that it is none of their business: “It is not for you to know,” Jesus says, “the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.”

Would that every person on earth could hear Jesus’ answer over and over again instead of following those who think that they have figured out when the end of the world will be, when Jesus will return and when Armageddon will take place. Jesus then commissions the disciples—and us—for the universalizing task that will expand their horizons, as it should also expand our own mindsets and concerns. “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you,” he tells them, “and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Just as the three storied-universe of the first century needs to be explained and understood, so does Jesus’ answer need a little explanation. The acquisition of the power of the Holy Spirit will enable us to abandon the narrow-minded, insular questions and concerns which humans have been asking from the infancy of our race. It is not by trying harder that we will catch the Spirit; rather, the Spirit will catch us and enable us to go where we never thought we could go. Jesus’ instruction to us through the disciples is leave our comfort zones after we have been empowered by the Spirit. What is the use of stories like the resurrection, the Ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit if they are treated as family secrets and enjoyed only in private? These are enabling and empowering stories. The question of the disciples is a powerless question, “When will you do this for us?” The answer of Jesus is an empowering answer: “*You will receive power...you shall be my witnesses, you will go to places you have avoided before, you will end up in places you have not even imagined or have always feared.*”

Samaria was to the disciples what the other side of the tracks is for us or worse. Samaria was a place to be avoided. Jerusalem was frightening enough for these Galilean hicks. The urban, multicultural center of power was a scary place for fishermen and peasants, yet it is there that they must wait in order to receive the power to go to the hard and difficult areas of the world.

Do we not hear the echo of that mandate today? Why are so many churches caught up in their own internal politics and institutional concerns, rather than focusing outward, on a world hungry for the peace and justice of the gospel? Because we have not received the power. Next Sunday the church will celebrate Pentecost and the text from Acts 2 will be read in many languages and we will sing, “Come Holy Spirit.” But to celebrate Pentecost without seriously considering the Ascension is like jumping to Easter without Holy Week and Good Friday. The Holy Spirit will come only if we’re willing to let go of Jesus as an external source of power. Christ wants us to have internal batteries, not long cords. The Holy Spirit is the gift of God to be within us all the time, to guide us and to take us to places we did not want to go and lands we never even imagined.

When our text ends, the disciples are still looking up and “two men in white robes”—angels, I suppose—tell them to quit looking up. Too many Christians spend more time looking up than getting down to God’s loving business powered by the Holy Spirit. The Resurrection and the Ascension are not so much doctrines to believe or piously ponder. These stories are for our transformation and also for the transformation of our world. May we be empowered to stay in our Jerusalems first but then to go out to the Samarias and to the scary ends of our world.

All authority and power and dominion to the name that is above all names—Jesus Christ our Lord—now and in the age to come. Amen.