

The Ascension*

The Rev. Ian Burch

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I come to the pulpit on this last Sunday of Eastertide to talk, not about the Resurrection of Jesus but rather his Ascension.

The Ascension doesn't get as much ink time in our Christian tradition as say, Jesus' birth or his Sermon on the Mount — in the case of the Episcopal church, you'll hear about the Ascension mainly in two places: during the Eucharist when the priest "recall[s] [Jesus'] death, resurrection and ascension" and the part of the Nicene Creed where we confess that Jesus "ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father."

Granted, we see Ascension art quite a lot — in icons and paintings — Jesus in some kind of white robe floating up into space while the stunned apostles look on. Ascension is mentioned in several places in the New Testament; the accounts are all brief and they're all slightly different. Ascension hymns are pretty thin on the ground, I discovered. Maybe Steve can correct me, but I don't remember many great choral works giving the Ascension a lot of air time.

It bears mentioning that Jesus wasn't the first one to return to God in this spectacular way — both Elijah and Enoch were taken up into heaven. The Catholic church adds Mary to the list of ascensions — though they call hers an Assumption rather than an Ascension, and before you ask, I don't claim to know the difference. Ezekiel wasn't exactly brought to heaven though God did a good job bringing heaven to Ezekiel. It was the same with John of Patmos, author of the Book of Revelation.

As Jesus ascended to God, we can only imagine how the apostles felt. They had just gotten over the shock of Jesus dying on a cross, and then he comes back to them and continues his ministry, teaching about the nature of the kingdom of God. They've just gotten used to having him back, and, in the middle of a friendly conversation on the Mount of Olives, he ascends into the sky and is hidden from sight by a cloud.

A friend and I were talking about this idea of height, of sky, of heaven, of being above it all. We commented that in everyday usage, going higher is better — getting above it all to be able to see. Getting a birds' eye view. The sky's the limit. Reach for the sky. Anyone who works in real estate knows very well how prices increase as one moves up in a highrise.

In more religious terms, many of the world's great wisdom traditions talk about a ladder or a staircase that can be climbed toward insight, enlightenment, or communion with God. Across religions and across cultures, people have always been captivated with the notion of leaving the heavy earth behind, floating away from cares and woes and troubles.

Floating up to God.

All of this — the art, the stories, the creeds and traditions — speaks to our hunch and the hunches of our ancestors that there is something of transcendent, divine significance, UP THERE.

Maybe that's true. But this morning, I want to offer you an alternative reading of today's lesson. Maybe whatever happens UP THERE isn't as important as we thought. Perhaps the way Jesus answers the apostles' question is more miraculous than his holy levitations.

Jesus sat with his friends breaking bread outside Jerusalem as was his custom, and the apostles can no longer contain the burning question on their minds: Jesus, when will the kingdom of God come to Israel? When will the kingdom of God come? Please, be specific. A date would be nice. Who among us hasn't asked that of God in the quiet places of our hearts?

I think I understand why it took them so long to gin up the courage to ask it. They had a lot to learn and a lot to do. The apostles have been following this man for three years, listening to his teachings about the kingdom of God. They've given up everything to sit at his feet and learn. They have cast out demons in his name and have felt the stirrings of God in the midst of their fellowship. They watched their teacher and friend break bread and share wine and say, "The kingdom of God is like these things." They even watched him die and then later destroy his own tomb.

So, surely they were more than ready to know when the promised kingdom would arrive— Jesus, now that we've learned all you have to teach about the kingdom of God — now that we've given ourselves wholly to you — tell us Jesus, tell us when the kingdom of God will come to Israel.

Tell us, Jesus, when will the kingdom of God will come to Milwaukee. And Jesus answers elegantly; "YOU will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and YOU will be my witnesses in Jerusalem...and to the ends of the earth." Not me. Not the one floating into space to return to the Father. But YOU. YOU will be given the power: Peter and John and Andrew and Mary and the rest of them.

In a way, Jesus is saying that the power to work for the kingdom of God is not UP THERE somewhere...is not at the top of a staircase or the summit of a mountain. The sky is not the thing. Instead, prepare yourselves for the power of God to come among you and change everything, transform everything.

Don't look at my sandals as they leave this precious earth; don't keep your eyes on heaven so long that you miss the Holy Spirit that will soon be among you. Look at each other and know that God's Spirit is coming among you to bring about the kingdom even unto the ends of the earth. Stop looking UP at me, says Jesus; my work is finished, and yours is just beginning. And by all means, hold onto your hats because the church is about to be born in fire and in wind and in tongues. Everything necessary for the salvation of the world will be provided. And you, my brothers and sisters and fellow apostles, will have to come back next week at Pentecost to hear how the story ends. Amen.

* modified from a sermon from June 1, 2014