

“In a cloud. In a cloud?
A bit dramatic wasn’t it, Jesus? A bit over the top!

Hands raised. Floating heavenwards-
and I’ll lay odds that future artists will dress you in shining white,
and paint the sky deeper blue- to ‘match’ your eyes.
Okay- so there were with some precedents:
Elijah and his chariots, and that fiery cloudy pillar thing
that moved around the wilderness;
but those were the old ways – you aren’t like that.

Is this really what you want us to remember about you, Jesus?
That you disappeared in a cloud and that you now live somewhere above the skies,
way beyond our reach?

What about your stories, your friendship; your tears, your pain, your laughter?
What about the way you believed in us, trusted us, sent us out to teach and heal?
I’m not sure that you being alive somewhere
where we cannot see you, talk with you, laugh and cry with you,
is going to be much of a help to us, Jesus.

Please, can’t you find a way of living with us,
close enough somehow for us to know that you’re near?

You said something once about a Spirit, a Holy Spirit from God,
who would be with us.
Does that mean you’re coming back to us?”

(Ruth Burgess c. 2006)

Let us pray: God of Wisdom and Word,
humble us to listen to your stories with open hearts;
may they write your message on our lives. Amen.

“Is this the time?”
The disciples are still wondering when Jesus will restore the kingdom.
The Kingdom; a sense of Divine Rule.

In the book of the Acts, while the gospel message is spreading to Judea, Samaria,
to Rome, Jesus promises the disciples they will receive the Power of the Spirit.
When Jesus is no longer on here on earth, God’s Spirit forms, and sends out the
‘Body of Christ’, the disciples and all new followers will do the work of Christ.

Verse nine describes Jesus' Ascension,

“Jesus was lifted up and a cloud took him out their sight.”

In Biblical terms a cloud represents God's presence, and the two figures represent heavenly messengers. Luke says being dressed in white symbolizes their importance; they are eye-witnesses.

The verses that follow the reading today focus on the community of disciples during the period between Jesus' ascension, and the gift of the Spirit given at Pentecost.

This time was a “neutral time”, a time of anticipation - not knowing what to expect, or when to expect it.

The Disciples stayed in Jerusalem, as they were instructed, it was a time of prayer and reflection.

Jesus died on Good Friday, was resurrected three days later, appeared to the disciples several times, and now he has been lifted up into a cloud.

What must the Disciples have been thinking?

Were they beginning to see, with Jesus, anything was possible?

Were they beginning to finally understand? Or were they just as confused as ever?

We celebrate the Ascension because it's part of our story, part of the foundation of our faith.

It shows the disciples Jesus' literal and bodily return to “heaven.”

It signals the end of his earthly ministry;

he has successfully completed all he came to do.

It symbolizes his becoming “God's Right Hand Man.”

And last, Jesus finally goes to prepare a place for us ...there are many rooms.....

When the disciples ask, “When is Christ going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” it shows their misunderstanding. Entering ‘God's Kingdom’ is not about marking the date on the calendar, but waiting to receive the Holy Spirit.

The scripture tells us it takes place 40-49 days (*there are differing opinions*), after the resurrection. Jesus, in plain sight of the disciples, is ‘taken up’ after instructing them to stay in Jerusalem and wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit.

As he ascends, a cloud hides him from their view and two figures in white appear, asking, “Galileans, why are you staring up at the sky?”

Jesus will return in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”

Stories of “heavenly ascents” were common in the time of Jesus.

They pointed to “the divine approval of an Exceptional Man” such as the Hebrew Scriptures' Enoch, Jeremiah, Elijah and Job.

In the Christian tradition, written in major creeds and belief statements, the Ascension is connected with the “exaltation” of Jesus. A word we don’t typically use outside the church.

The Oxford Dictionary describes ‘exaltation’ as great happiness, or raised to a higher rank. In Biblical terms, exaltation means, through his ascension, Jesus will sit right beside God...raised to a higher rank. We sometimes say, “She is moving up the corporate ladder.”

A man works very closely with his boss, helping him with whatever needs to be done, completing projects without even being asked, being ahead of the game, generally being indispensable, being his boss’ right-hand man. (*we wouldn’t say, “He was the boss’ left-hand man...”*)

The Ascension of Jesus has been an important theme of Christian art. For most artists in the fifth and sixth century, Jesus is depicted, “rising up from the earth into the clouds”, as the scripture describes.

It’s only in recent images most (maybe some) of us understand Heaven is not literally “up there.” Artists have tried to find other ways of painting, sculpting the ascension, even though most of them still have a sense of Jesus being in ‘the sky.’

A sixth century painter, **Hans von Kulmbach**, has Christ disappearing out of the top of the painting with only his feet, from the ankles down, still present. Another famous painting, “Ascension” by Salvador Dali (1958), shows the bottom of Jesus feet, his arms outstretched, surrounded by a bright yellow circle and two angel faces.

Art, literature, and other medium can not begin to describe the Ascension.

At the time of Jesus’ Ascension, people generally believed in a three-part universe; Heaven above, a flat Earth (with Jerusalem at its center), and the Underworld below. Heaven was separated from the earth by the visible sky: a solid upside-down bowl where God’s throne sat on the arched roof of the earth. (*Isaiah 40:22*) Humans, looking up from earth saw the floor of heaven.

In a famous lecture by **Rudolph Bultmann** (*aprox. 1941*), he said,

“We no longer believe in a Three-Storied Universe which takes the Creeds for granted. No one who is old enough to think for himself supposes that God lives in a here and now Heaven. Heaven is not an actual place you can find on a map. And if this is so, the story of Christ’s ascension into heaven is over.”

And if heaven is not above us, where did Jesus ascend to? Does it matter?
Maybe not so much; our faith is strong.
We have lived with the scripture,
in the scripture,
because of the scripture we stand firm in our beliefs.

The stories remind Jesus' followers/and us, not to stand looking back at the past,
but to turn toward the future.

Another way: the Incarnation of Jesus brought Heaven to earth
the Ascension of Jesus brought Earth to heaven

Jesus has the last word on everything and everyone, from angels to armies. *1Peter 3:22*
He's standing right beside God, and whatever he says; goes.
The Ascension reminds us that we all live in Jesus' "last word."
We affirm this in our creeds, hymns and prayers.

Keeping in our minds the amazing image of the bottom of Jesus' feet
disappearing into the clouds...

*"Does that mean you are coming back to us?
And if you are no dramatics this time, please, Jesus.
Just come to us quietly.....no more clouds!"*

Amen.