

Acts 1: 6-14“The Ascension of Jesus”

So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” When he had said this, they watched him being lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were staring up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stare up toward heaven? Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come as certainly, and as mysteriously as he left. So they left the Mount of Olives and returned to Jerusalem. It was a little over half a mile. They went to the upper room they had been using as a meeting place: Peter, John, James, Andrew, Philip, Thomas, Bartholomew, James (son of Alphaeus), Simon (the Zealot), Judas (son of James). They all instantly devoted themselves to prayer, together with certain women...and Jesus’ mother Mary, and his brothers.

Let us pray: God of wisdom and word,
as storytellers we shape your unfolding story,
as passionate people we share your passion for justice,
as bearers of your word we are your life in the world.

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. This kingdom doesn’t refer to a certain area of land or a community, but indicates a sense of divine rule.

In the book of Acts, we read the gospel message is spreading to Judea, Samaria and finally to Rome. Jesus promises the disciples they will receive the power of the Spirit. When Jesus is no longer here on earth God’s Spirit will form and send out The Body (the disciples and all new followers) to do the work of Christ.

The description of Jesus’ ascension in the book of Acts tells us, “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 dressed in white represent heavenly messengers. Luke says white symbolizes their importance...they are eye witnesses.

The verses that follow this reading focus on the community of disciples, 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 prayed and reflected together about the things Jesus had told them.

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

This is part of the story we often forget, we focus on the resurrection. But each time we say the Apostle's Creed we affirm, "...he rose again; he ascended into heaven." This creed doesn't mention the seven times Jesus appeared after his resurrection (raised from the dead), and before his ascension (raised up).

We want to acknowledge the Ascension because it's part of our story, part of the foundation of our Christian faith telling of a literal and bodily return to 'heaven.' It signals the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, he has successfully completed all he came to do and the ascension symbolizes his becoming God's right hand man. Jesus finally goes to prepare a place for us...there are many rooms.....

The disciples stayed in Jerusalem as they were instructed, it was a time of prayer and reflection. This group of disciples, now numbering about one hundred and twenty men and women, were a community of prayer and finally chose Mathias as the twelfth disciple to take the place of Judas. And continued to pray while they waited.

What should we do while we wait?

What do we actually do while we wait?

When the disciples ask, "When is Christ going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" it shows their misunderstanding. Entering God's kingdom isn't about marking the date on the calendar, but waiting to receive the Holy Spirit. Waiting. So many times in our faith-filled life we find ourselves waiting. Why are we waiting so much? Waiting during Advent, waiting during Lent, waiting for Christ to return.

Waiting for God to answer our prayers. Sometimes it takes creative waiting to bring about creative solutions. We need to think outside the box...God does.

While this larger group of women and men were gathered in prayer, they were also a group that practiced inclusion. What is creative inclusion?

For the new followers it meant including all into their new community.

It should for us, too.

The ascension of Jesus is his departure from the earth into the presence of God. The scripture tells us it takes place 40-49 days (there are differing opinions), after the resurrection. Jesus appears and tells the disciples to stay in Jerusalem and wait for the coming of the power of the Holy Spirit. Then Jesus, in plain sight of the disciples, is taken up. And when 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.”

There are differing views when the ascension actually happened. The time ranges from the day of resurrection- to 40 or 49 days later. John’s gospel talks about the ascension three different times. The third time, he describes Jesus saying, “Do not hold me, for I am not yet ascended to my Father...” (John 20:17)

Stories of heavenly ascents were fairly common in the time of Jesus. They pointed to the divine approval of an exceptional man. People knew of Hebrew prophets Enoch, “*Thus all the days of Enoch were three hundred sixty five years. Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him*” (Genesis 5:23, 24) And Elijah, “*As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and separated the two (Elijah and Elisha) of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven.*” (2Kings 2: 11)

In the Christian tradition, written in major creeds and belief statements, the ascension is connected with the exaltation of Jesus. 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 next to God.

A man works very closely with his boss, helping him with whatever needs to done, completing projects without even being asked, being ahead of the game, generally being indispensable, being his boss’ right-hand man.

At the time of the ascension, people generally believed in a three-part universe; heaven above, a flat earth with Jerusalem at its center and the under-world below. Heaven was separated from the earth by the visible sky, a solid up-side 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 local 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. Modern theologians have changed their theology making less of the mysterious/the mythical in order to describe

a more human character while abandoning a God who sits on a throne above Jerusalem in a heaven that is the endless sustaining life of God.”

Many of us strongly disagree. Some of us agree with only part of his thinking. We have lived with the scripture, in the scripture and even for the scripture; we stand firm in our beliefs.

For most artists in the 5th and 6th century, Jesus is depicted rising up from the earth into the clouds as the scripture describes. Since Galileo’s discovery of the telescope, some of us now understand heaven is not literally ‘up there.’

Artists have tried to find other ways of painting and sculpting images of the ascension, even though most of them still have a sense of Jesus being in ‘the sky.’

A 6th century painter, Hans von Kulmbach (1531), “The Ascension of Christ”, shows the disciples all gathered around looking up as Jesus disappears with only his feet and part of his red garment showing at the top edge of the painting. Another famous painting also called, “The Ascension of Christ” by Salvador Dali (1958), shows only the bottom of Christ’s feet.

If you can, have a look at these powerful images.

The story remind Jesus followers/us, not to stand looking back at the past, but to look toward the future. The true future.

Another way; the incarnation of Jesus brought heaven to Earth,
the ascension of Jesus brought earth to Heaven.

The ascension reminds us of who Jesus really was/is; equal to God, equal to the Spirit.
.....in spite of the questionable images of Jesus’ feet disappearing up 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!”*

Ruth Burgess