

## THE ASCENSION OF OUR LORD

May 16, 2021

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Acts 1:1-11; Eph 1:17-23; Mk 16:15-20

The readings for the feast of the Ascension present a problem for a homilist. I don't think that I am the only one that is not quite sure to say about them. The first reading from the Acts of the Apostles describes the same story that ends Luke's gospel. It's a sort of hinge between the gospels' accounts of Jesus' life, death, resurrection and the history of the missionary activity of his disciples and the spread of Christianity around the Mediterranean world.

In Luke's time people believed that they lived in a three-story cosmos: heaven, earth and the underworld. In our time we have seen, at least virtually, people rocket off the face of the earth to the moon and send vehicles to explore Mars. Our ventures into space reveal that we are part of a glorious universe of turning planets and stars reflecting other suns. So far, Heaven hasn't been found. Also, we are aware that up is a relative direction, depending where we are on the planet.

All this makes it hard to think of the Ascension in spatial terms because it would mean that Jesus is not here anymore, but up there in Heaven. So, it's important to remember that Luke is not reporting on an event but preaching a truth about Jesus. Perhaps he is harking back to the story of Elijah being taken up to Heaven in a fiery chariot as a precedent.

The disciples who had hoped that Jesus would restore the kingdom to Israel and drive the Roman oppressors out must have been disappointed that their hopes were not realized, but the two men in white garments, who might have been the same two men whom Mary Magdalene saw in the empty tomb on Easter morning, promised the disciples that Jesus would return.

Gradually the early Christians moved into the future and the expected return of Jesus felt less and less imminent. The Church came to focus on Heaven as the place where believing Christians would reunite with Jesus after death.

But the two people in white who told the women at the tomb on Easter that they were looking for Jesus in the wrong place asked an important question- "Why are you standing there, looking at the sky?"

But it would be foolish and probably arrogant to dismiss the importance of the Ascension. My favorite preacher Bill Epperly wrote, "The importance of the Ascension is perspective. Rising to the clouds gives us broader perspective on our lives and the planet rather than individualistic images of salvation and personal well-being. The Ascension challenges us to bring heaven to earth, that is to live Jesus' values in our world...When we live from a higher perspective, we can transcend our own self-interest to embrace the well-being of the whole earth, including strangers, enemies, non-humans...we don't need to look to the heavens for inspiration. The ever-present God is right here, giving all the guidance and inspiration we need, if we but look beyond ourselves. Our mission is here-to heal, to embrace, to welcome and to love.

We don't need to look up to heaven, for this is the day the Lord has made; we rejoice in this day and do the work that is set before us by God. If God is everywhere, then we are already in "heaven," that is in Relationship with God here and now. We experience the intimacy of God in every moment because the whole earth is filled with divine beauty and wisdom."