

Ascension**Towards Heaven**

Acts 1:1-11; Luke 24:44-43

It's intriguing that Luke's Gospel ends and Luke's Acts of the Apostles begins with the story of the Ascension, that mystical event that sees Jesus move from earth to heaven. One commentator describes the Ascension event as that moment when Jesus takes humanity into heaven.

It's a hard story for the post-modern mind to grapple with – we are not accustomed to seeing or imagining bodies being lifted up into the clouds. I think the fact clouds are involved might be a clue: this is a moment of mystery and wonder, not one to press for too literal an understanding. But it is important. The Ascension of Jesus makes it into both the Apostles' and the Nicene Creeds along with most other confessions of faith.

On the one hand it is a story all about Jesus. It is His miraculous, indefinable departure from this world. Jesus had come to earth from heaven, and now returns to reign at the right hand of God. Jerusalem is the point of departure for the ministry of the apostles. It is in the Holy City that they will soon be baptized with the Holy Spirit. In Acts the resurrection and the ascension are separated by the significant forty days, a time of preparation. Like the forty days Moses spent on Mount Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments, then instructing the children of God about what God expects of them. Jesus spends forty days instructing the disciples about God's Kingdom, and then telling them that God would soon come in power when the Holy Spirit illuminated and transformed their lives.

On the other hand, it is a story all about the apostles, and us. It is the event that changes the locus of Christ's work and ministry from Jesus Himself to those who follow Him. Jesus is no longer here

to preach good news, heal the sick, and feed the hungry. This mission now falls to the disciples, to carry it as new apostles to the ends of earth, and the beyond their time, to us. No wonder the disciples look towards heaven.

But He had gone. And they were left. With a promise of help to come in the Holy Spirit, but they were left, to get on with it. It's no different for us. We are invited to believe, without hard facts; we are invited to imagine, though we feel inadequate; we are challenged to look beyond literalism in this story and look to those its deeper, broader, higher meaning, that take us from earth, to heaven, and then back to earth again. We are challenged, just as the first apostles were, to take the knowledge that we have, the experience that we have, the ideas that we have, and to put them into practice. We are invited to look towards heaven, and then to get on with the work given to us here on earth.

We are, like the first disciples, called on our own way to share and show our faith. Some will speak, some will pray, some will visit, some will make food, some will make a phone-call, some will send a card, some will bring flowers. But we will share and show our faith. We are all apostles now, and our world has never needed this loving faith of ours more. Showing what it means to be caring and compassionate, and to love our neighbours as ourselves.

We will face times of wistfulness and wonder, and sometimes deep upset as we miss those we have loved and lost, who worked beside us, lived with us, shared the load with us. We will not know what to do next at times, and long for what has been, or what has yet to be. We will gaze into heaven, looking up, until someone says to us, 'What are you doing? Get on with it!' Or more gently we find the slow realisation coming to us that whatever it is that we are facing, whatever challenge or difficulty or doubt or fear or loss, we are the ones who are going to deal with it.

Maybe alone, but I think more likely with those around us who may share some of our sense of challenge, or difficulty, or doubt, or fear or loss.

Though it's cloaked in mystery and wonder, though we may want to read it as a parable about the transition being made from the ministry of Jesus to the ministry of the Church, the Ascension reminds us that the ministry of Jesus *is* the ministry of the Church and we are the ones, today, to make it happen.

Standing around, looking into heaven for a while, the apostles needed that moment of looking upwards: for inspiration, for confirmation, for realisation. But then they turn around and move on. And in that turning, the Christian church begins to take shape.

The story of the Ascension deals straightforwardly with the fact that that fearful, waiting community of women and men, anxious and bewildered, had no power of its own. And yet, oddly enough, power was given, so this fragile little community, and the individuals within it, found energy, courage, imagination and resources completely disproportionate to its size.

My friend Mark Oakley, now Dean of Southwark, tells of the writer Julian Barnes who once said in an interview: "I don't believe in God. But I do miss Him." Plenty of people today look around and conclude that this is a world without God. A world where children die in poverty of preventable disease; where people are drowning in seas trying to escape war and tyranny and famine. A world where the open sores of Gaza and Ukraine, and Sudan and South Sudan, and so many other places grind on and down. A world where the Church which still does so much good for the whole community is edged out or ignored because people 'don't do God.'

Maybe with our heads bowed down we feel that we live in a world without God. The pain we carry for ourselves and for our loved ones. The fear of being judged as inadequate. Not knowing how

we will make ends meet. Not knowing if we will ever be loved. A time of grief and bereavement that stops us in our tracks. Do you feel you are living in a world without God?

We talk about the centrality of presence, of incarnation in our faith, yet quite a lot of Christian faith is constructed around absence. "If You had been here," says Martha to Jesus, "my brother would not have died." From the cross Jesus cries out, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?" Even Easter morning is focused on an empty space and a message that He is 'Not here.' And with Ascension there is an image of apostles looking towards heaven, seeing Jesus disappear. Who wants to celebrate being left behind? Who wants a Sunday to remind us of God's absence?

Here is a way to look at this day. We need to get used to a world without Jesus, or rather, living in a world without the Jesus we've known, because things are different now. It's almost as if Jesus said to the apostles, "It's going to be different. Don't expect to see me around in the old way." And in Luke's Gospel we actually read that it was as Jesus withdrew the apostles were blessed.

Faith in life, in the easy times and the hard times, is about learning to live on our own feet, with the mess of our own hearts and mistakes, but always nudged and inspired and surprised by the light of Jesus coming to shine on us. In the words and music in the church; in the kindness of people around us; in all the unexpected goodness that still happens because, somehow, it has been inspired by remembering the person of Jesus and letting that memory become real. Jesus may have gone to heaven, however we picture that, but the reality that I believe, and I see, is in the goodness of people like you getting on with the work of Jesus now, because that work still matters, and still makes a difference.

It is the Ascension truth that it is just when the clouds seem to be taking hope from our sight that we are blessed – if we stop looking towards heaven for too long, and start looking at the people

and the world around us, and begin the repair of this world through gifts of compassion and kindness.ⁱ

Kenneth Grahame, born in Edinburgh, wrote in his book, *The Wind in the Willows*: “The Mole had long wanted to make the acquaintance of the Badger. He seemed, by all accounts, to be such an important personage and, though rarely visible, to make his unseen influence felt by everybody about the place.” This is how it is with Jesus: maybe not visible in person, but His unseen influence is felt by everybody in so many places, and in so many lives and hearts.ⁱⁱ Look towards heaven, then lower your gaze to earth. There’s work to be done.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Mark Oakley, *By Way of the Heart*, pps 73-76

ⁱⁱ Kenneth Graham, *The Wind in the Willows*, p46