

It's not a story you often hear preached in Protestant churches. With our joint heritage shaped in the late Renaissance and the Enlightenment, the mystical, fanciful nature of this story seems vaguely ridiculous to us, almost embarrassing. Even the art that celebrates this story can seem a little silly. While studying this passage this week, I saw and read about lots of images of the apostles with astonished looks on their faces, mouths agape, looking for all the world like a bunch of slack-jawed dullards. Some famous artworks even center on Jesus' feet sticking out from the clouds, the last part of him visible as he rose. It's a story that can lead to apt but uncomfortable questions from children. "Where did Jesus go? How high is up? Is that where heaven is? If Jesus went up into heaven, can we still find his body up there?" The Rev. Ignacio Castuera tells the story of a bright 13-year old in his class who remarked, "I wonder how far has Jesus traveled since the Ascension. If we assume that he is traveling at the speed of light, he has only reached the far ends of our Galaxy, The Milky Way." Presumably, in this young man's thought, if we ever develop faster-than-light travel, we could catch up with Jesus someday.

Part of the problem, of course, is that we've long since discarded the three-story model of the universe that was common belief at the time our Scriptures were set down. To the ancients, remember, this world was essentially the ground floor of a cosmic house. Below us was a dark and foreboding place of evil spirits, death and punishment. Above, God in heaven with the blessed. God had placed the Sun, Moon and stars on the firmament, or ceiling, in between Earth and Heaven, much like we'd strategically place track lighting. There were windows between Earth and Heaven, too, through which God sent rain, snow, hail and the occasional angel, and through which, presumably, Jesus returned to his Father. This story seems to presume that concept of the universe and leaves us rather at a loss to work it into the cosmos as we currently understand it.

There's a part of me that enjoys unanswerable questions and probably would have been egging on Rev. Castuera's 13-year old friend. That part of me doesn't have a bit of trouble with this story. In that way, I agree with the Rev. Dr. Catherine Taylor, who wrote, "It's not a preacher's job to take the Bible's mysterious stories and make sense of them, to get rid of the strangeness or the wildness or the unpredictability. If a story is mysterious, then the church needs to practice being mystified, not jump as quickly as possible to some explanation that removes all the shadows as well as the light." So, I'm not going to make any attempt this morning to "explain" the story of the Ascension. But I do think it's important for us to understand the truth within the story, even if we are doubtful of the form of the story itself. I'd suggest to you that whether we approach this story as literal truth or as metaphorical truth, there is something profound for us to learn here. Encoded within this story are not only the continued vindication of Jesus and the affirmation of his message, but also a powerful promise for the Church and a call for us to take up the mantle of our departed Savior.

To begin with, we cannot separate the story of the Ascension from the story of Easter. Indeed, in Luke's Gospel it would appear that the Ascension happened the very night of Jesus' resurrection. There is nothing in the Greek to delineate the passage of time between Jesus' appearance to the disciples in Jerusalem on Easter night and what we take to be different incidents beginning with either verse 44 ("Then he said to them, "these are my words, etc.") or with verse 50 ("Then he led them out..."). It is only when Luke retells the story in Acts that he makes clear that 40 days have passed between the two events. But the passage of time notwithstanding, it is clear that

Luke and the early Christians saw the Ascension as the culmination of the Resurrection. Not only did God restore Jesus to life but God further rewarded the Faithful Servant by raising him to heavenly enthronement. Remember the words of Paul to the Ephesians, “God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come.” For Paul and for Luke, Jesus’ mission was too important to be allowed to end in death at the hands of the Sanhedrin and the Romans. God’s power trumps the powers of the world, both religious and state. Jesus’ ascension, like Jesus’ resurrection, is God’s seal of approval on the life, work and words of Jesus. By telling this story, Luke is showing the divine validation of the mission he reports that Jesus announced in the synagogue in Nazareth: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

We have seen and continue to see power abused so often in our history and in our lives that I think it’s always appropriate to pause when we read of the power of God to recall what kind of power we are talking about. It is not the same as the power of the world. That is the power exercised by the Sanhedrin, who tried Jesus and had him beaten, and the power exercised by Pilate, who had Jesus tortured and executed. The power of the world is the power that still manifests itself in fear and intimidation, in torture and execution. That is not the power of God, the power that creates and heals and frees and loves. The power of God, as revealed in Christ Jesus, is the power that is not afraid to be weak and vulnerable, power that is even willing to accept destruction. Whenever Paul celebrates the power that he perceives in Jesus, the power that is above all rule and authority and dominion, I always remember the words of the great hymn which Paul quoted in his letter to the Philippians: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” We need not be shy about celebrating the Ascension as an affirmation of Jesus’ power, for that power is wholly nurturing and kind and empowering to others. Jesus, as Paul reminded the Ephesians, is the one who fills all in all. The power of Jesus is the power of fulfillment and love.

It is surely the realization of this truth that led the disciples, as Luke reported, to worship the Risen Christ and to return to Jerusalem with joy. Worship, after all, is properly reserved to God and the disciples, good Jews that they were, would have been fiercely monotheistic. But in recognizing the affirmation of Jesus by God in the Resurrection and Ascension, they also recognized the divine nature that Jesus shared with God, that power of fulfillment and love. It is here where the life of Christ can begin to be understood as the self-revelation of God. The disciples worship Jesus because they now understand the words, “the Father and I are one.” Now they see Jesus not just as wise teacher but as Emmanuel, God With Us. The disciples return to Jerusalem rejoicing because they perceive that Jesus, now ascended to God, will never leave them again. Like God, he will be with them always. John S. McClure, professor of

homiletics at Louisville Presbyterian Seminary writes, “The Ascension of Jesus Christ marked the end of Christ's earthly existence and the beginning of a new period of time, one in which Christ's relationship with the Church is not restricted by the boundaries of time and space. Christ is now available to all people all of the time through the work of the Holy Spirit.” And so the disciples worship Jesus, the Son, on the hill overlooking Bethany and they go back to the Temple and worship the Father and give thanks for all that has happened.

Just as the Ascension marks a turning point in the disciples’ understanding of Jesus, so it also marks a turning point in how they see themselves. Their joyful return to the city is also powered by their complete confidence in Jesus’ ability to follow through on his promise: “And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” The power that they recognize and worship in Jesus will shortly be available to them. As Luke retells the story in Acts, they now know they can confidently await that gift to continue Jesus’ mission: “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.” The disciples rejoice because they truly count themselves heirs to the loving power of God, what Paul called “the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints... the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.” It is this power that enables us to overcome trials in life that we could not overcome on our own. It is this power that enables us to love the unlovable. It is this power that enables us to act boldly for God and our neighbor in a world that tells us we should only be looking out for ourselves.

Over time, Christians have come to understand the promise of the Ascension on other levels as well. Because the Church, as Paul taught us, is now the Body of Christ on Earth, what is true for Jesus is true for the Body. In Christ’s ascension, all of us ascend. As God lifted up Jesus, raising him to Heaven and seating him at the right hand of God, so are we all lifted up, recognized as God’s own beloved children and put at God’s right hand. John McClure, good Presbyterian that he is, reminds us that John Calvin “envisions Jesus as high and lifted up, seated at the right hand of God, where (God) "lavishes spiritual riches" upon "(God's) own people.”” McClure goes on interpreting Calvin to say, “Most important, Ascension-faith discovers that Christ's Ascension "has opened the way into the Heavenly Kingdom, which had been closed through Adam." The Ascension is nothing short of the inauguration of the Kingdom of God, a new age in which faithful Christians find that they have access, through Christ, to God's ultimate reality and purposes.” As the Body of Christ, we can boldly claim to participate in the love of God and in God’s power of love. This is good news indeed for us and for all of humanity, whom the Body is called to serve.

In fact, the good news for humanity and for all of creation runs even deeper than that. Again, from John Calvin, “Since (Christ) entered heaven in our (human) flesh, as if in our name, it follows, as the apostle says, that *in a sense we already sit with God in the heavenly places in* (Christ).” The work of the Incarnation, begun with Gabriel’s announcement to Mary, continues in the Ascension. The Word has become Flesh, sanctifying all flesh, linking all Creation with the Creator, and now the Creator takes all Creation unto Himself through the Ascension of Jesus, fully God and fully Human. And this great blessing falls not just on the Body of Christ, those who have turned to God through Christ for the power to live the abundant life, but on all of

creation. As Paul wrote to the Romans, all of this was done by God, “while we were yet sinners.” The power for which the disciples waited comes by the Holy Spirit to believers but the love of God cherishes all Creation without reference to either faith or works. God’s love is always there – it only takes faith to realize it. John McClure concludes his study of the Ascension with these words: “(The Ascension) means that God loves, values, holds, and will transform our fragile and broken humanity in Christ. It means that, at the Ascension, Jesus took all of human life, which he cared for so deeply, and brought it “into the heavenly places,” into the very heart of God. This includes the suffering refugee, the abused child or spouse, the victim of war or terror, the lonely one in the nursing home, the one who struggles with depression or a lost sense of worth and value, those who are sick, all who are in difficult transitions in life.” I’m glad for talented and Spirit-filled Presbyterians like McClure who help me to appreciate some of Calvin’s thought, even if I’ll never be a Calvinist.

Along with the powerful good news revealed by this mysterious story of Ascension comes a responsibility, a charge to the Church, and an indication of an appropriate response. Upon their receipt of this good news, the disciples return to Jerusalem with great joy; “and they were continually in the temple blessing God.” Luke’s gospel begins and ends with a story in the Temple. We go from Zechariah, soon to be the father of John the Baptizer, receiving unthought-of glad tidings when he was leading in the worship of God, to the disciples rejoicing over unthought-of glad tidings and worshipping God in the same Temple. Zechariah’s story begins with sadness, confusion and disbelief; the disciples’ story begins with sadness, confusion and disbelief. For Zechariah, there is sadness over Elizabeth’s barrenness, confusion at the proclamation of the angel that he will be a father, and disbelief that such a thing could happen. The disciples are sad at the death of their Lord, confused at the reports of the disappearance of his body, and disbelieving when he appears before them. Both stories end in joy. But for Zechariah, the joy comes only after a time of waiting. The disciples, too, face a time of waiting but wait with joy. In either case, however, it is the work of God that brings both stories to fulfillment and in both cases the proper response is worship. Zechariah is struck dumb because he does not accept and worship. The apostles see and believe and worship and go forth with joy. Like them, we have been blessed with the presence of the Risen Christ – our response should be as theirs: to worship.

Our charge is to continue the mission of Christ, empowered as we are by the Holy Spirit. We celebrate Pentecost next week but we know that we no longer need wait until 50 days after Easter for the Spirit’s power to be manifest in our lives. As Paul told the Ephesians, those of us who believe have the immeasurable greatness of God’s power available to us. And, as Paul wrote, God has made Christ the head of all things for the Church, which is Christ’s body. Luke tells twice how Jesus charged his disciples to continue his work. “Repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in my name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.” “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.” We have the power to be witnesses, now it is up to us to fulfill that calling. We need not, as Francis of Assisi reminded his followers, preach the Good News with words, but we must proclaim it wherever we go. The resurrected human body of Jesus of Nazareth may have risen into Heaven, but the Body of Christ, the Church, remains on Earth. We are the answer to the question, “Where did Jesus go?”

In order to fulfill our calling from Jesus, we need not rise up into the heavens, as Luke tells us Jesus did. All we need do is rise to the occasion, as it presents itself. All we need to do is rise above petty concerns and focus on the great and good truths of life – that God loves us and all of humanity and all of Creation and that the Living God desires a loving, nurturing relationship with us, Her children. Empowered by the Spirit, we are called to rise up and take our place among those who stand for the right, who bring good news to the poor, who care for the weak, who help the helpless. We are not called to stand and look up into the heavens for Jesus' disappearing feet. Instead we are called to rise like him by the power of God into God's love and to share that love with all we meet. Thanks be to God.