

A Promise Fulfilled  
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Date: June 5, 2011

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Today is the Sunday in the church year where we celebrate the Ascension of Jesus Christ, and look forward to Pentecost next Sunday. Like so many miracle stories in our Bible, the Ascension may seem odd. We have this image of Jesus with the disciples on a mountain and he's giving them instructions and helping them to understand his teachings, like usual. He's telling them that soon they will have power and authority from the Holy Spirit—that soon they will be sent out to witness and spread the good news to the ends of the earth.

And this seems normal enough, but then we have this verse, "When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight." Strange, right?

Professor Joseph Weber, a Christian scholar is noted as complaining, "Most contemporary Christians think the resurrection and ascension are a kind of two-stage rocket: the resurrection gets the body of Jesus up from the ground and then the ascension launches it into outer space." These events are not exactly typical of all human experiences and then notions of gravity, altitude, and science in general come into play and it's no wonder that many Christians ignore Ascension of the Lord Day completely.

So what do we do with the Ascension? How can we even begin to understand what it means and why it matters?

I would rather focus on other aspects of the passage; there are so many wonderful lines in this story after all. You have Jesus telling the disciples to not concern themselves with the time or the periods that God will enact the restoration of Israel. I'm pretty sure that Harold Camping, the Christian Radio personality who recently predicted the end of the world and the subsequent Rapture of the Righteous on May 21st didn't get this memo when he was making statements about God's impending judgment.

But Jesus is telling the disciples to be concerned with matters that they can actually do something about. Jesus is pretty much telling them not to focus on when something may or may not be happening—let God handle that! In the words of Jesus from Jesus Christ Superstar, "Don't you mind about the future, don't you try to think ahead. Save tomorrow for tomorrow. Think about today instead." Jesus is saying, both in the passage and in the musical, to focus on spreading his teachings to others and focus on living out those teachings by showing compassion to everyone we encounter.

We shouldn't just stand around and wonder when Israel will be completely restored (or in the case of Harold Camping, he probably shouldn't just stand around and predict when the world will end and the Rapture will happen.) Especially since he's gotten it wrong twice already! The point is, if we say we're Christians we need to go out there and prove it by our actions and words; by the way we live our lives.

And on top of this, we have the men in white robes asking the disciples "Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" Again, the passage is hinting at future actions, on the importance of the disciples doing something about all that they've learned. In this case, they are to go back to Jerusalem and wait for the Holy Spirit to come, start planning and think of some tactics for spreading the message of Jesus. They should be thinking about how they can be witnesses in Judea and Samaria and the ends of the earth. And to do this, to ponder and prepare themselves for their journeys to come, they gather together and devote themselves to prayer.

But some things are not easy, and I'm afraid that we shouldn't just completely ignore that whole miracle of Jesus being lifted up and a cloud taking him out of sight thing. We may think that people who predict the end of the world and the Rapture and all these things are a little crazy, but there are scriptures that point to these possibilities. And when taken too far, or, I would argue, interpreted incorrectly, you have people saying that the world will end on such and such date and that the Rapture will take place. And then the righteous will be taken away up into the sky just like Jesus when he ascended into heaven in today's passage.

Yet, instead of writing off the Ascension completely just because some people seem to take it too far, I think there's actually a lot that we can take away from this story. First there's the whole notion of the teachings of Jesus being up to us to spread. The whole so what factor. So Jesus is gone—what are we going to do about it? What can we do to spread his message of love, compassion, and acceptance to all people?

And another thing, this text, believe it or not, is one of the best texts we have to show God understanding and experiencing human life to the fullest. Easter was pretty recent when you think about it. And even before that, you have Good Friday—a hard day in the Christian tradition.

In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus dies on the cross quoting Psalm 22, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" Good Friday can be a tough day for people to handle; you wonder where God was during all of that suffering and pain. You may try to put yourself in Jesus' shoes and wonder how it felt to have your friends abandon you and all the work you've done in your life seem to have failed. And then you can ask yourself where God was for you when times got hard or you really needed comfort from God and had a whole lot of trouble feeling it.

But the Ascension means a great deal in terms of God completely understanding the best and worst of what human beings experience on earth. Laurence Hull Stookey, a noted liturgical scholar, points out, "The Risen Christ takes along the fullness of human life experienced by Jesus, including the worst of earthly agony. Christians have no good reason for doubting that God understands in the most personal possible way our human struggle, sorrows, and defeats." When Jesus apparently rises into heaven, he takes with him all of his earthly experiences, both the good and the bad. And we can rest assured that God does indeed understand what we go through.

In our tradition, we have the life and the teachings of Jesus; we have Good Friday and the death of Jesus, and then the Resurrection on Easter and the Ascension today. The Ascension completes this journey. God's promises are fulfilled. And this is the last thing we can take away from the Ascension today. Stookey relates again, "The Ascension affirms that what God begins, God completes. The same Word of God that came from God to dwell among us returns to God . . . God is dependable."

We see Jesus joining God in heaven, to reign in glory. And this means no more fear, no more pain, no more suffering, no more struggling. Now the work will be, in many respects, up to the disciples both then and now! God began this journey with Jesus in Bethlehem and God is there to welcome Jesus after everything he went through. And the same can be said for all of us!

When we stop and think about the sadness of Good Friday and then the glory of the Ascension today, we can begin to understand how joyful this day really is. This is why many of the hymns for today have a whole lot of Alleluias in them. One of the verses of our first Ascension hymn was:

"Hail the day that sees Christ rise, Alleluia!

To a throne in paradise, Alleluia!

Christ, the Lamb for sinners given, Alleluia!

Enters now the highest heaven, Alleluia!"

So I hope that we all can take away a thing or two from celebrating the Ascension—the importance of the disciples' actions both back then and for us modern-day disciples now. And the whole notion of God truly understanding our suffering and the things that we go through because of Jesus' eventual return to God, however we conceive of this idea. And finally, we know that what God begins, God completes, that God is dependable and will see promises through.

Maybe the Ascension is still odd and we may wonder why modern Christians bother with it at all. When I taught the Ascension to a former Confirmation class, the students looked at me at the end and one of them responded, "Yeah, that's fine, but it's still weird, Lauren." And maybe that's where most of us are sitting today, who knows.

But like so many seemingly problematic Biblical miracle stories, this one points to some of those deep and abiding truths about God that can give us hope, give us courage, and inspire us to go out there and see the promises of God through to the end. And so we wait with the disciples in the Upper Room, we wait for the Holy Spirit to come and urge us on, to go out into the world and be Christ's witnesses, "in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." May it be so with us. Amen.