

June 2, 2019 - The Seventh Sunday of Easter - Ascension Sunday

“The Miracle of Ascension” - by Rev. Seth D. Jones ©

Scripture: Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53

We are a week away from Pentecost, and in the church calendar, 10 days before Pentecost, the Ascension of Our Lord is celebrated, which was on Thursday (May 30th). The Ascension only appears in the writings of Luke, and he writes about it twice - here in the 24th chapter of his Gospel and also in the beginning of Acts. The Gospel of John implies it and the Gospel of Mark makes a brief mention in the section that was likely added on after Mark wrote it. We don't talk about it much at all in church.

I don't know what many of you think about miraculous events. The acceptance of a miracle, outside of our direct experience of the miraculous, requires the acceptance of a particular view of the world. Reality, in other words, must operate differently for you if you believe in miracles. David Hume, the great philosopher from the 18th century, laid the foundation for the modern rejection of the miraculous by positing that, since miracles run counter to perceived and common experience, that for the miracle to occur, either there has been a violation of natural law or a deception of the senses. Since natural law cannot be violated (for how then could there be a functioning natural law?), the likelihood is that the senses have been deceived in some way, and therefore all miracles must be rejected, barring direct physical evidence and proof, which would therefore conform them to natural law and, by definition, would no longer be miracles.

Compared to the prior millenia and eons before the Scientific Revolution, and the philosophical revolution of the Enlightenment era which rapidly followed the Scientific Revolution, this is a truly radical idea. We don't think of it as radical because we have lived in the shadow of David Hume for almost 350 years. We live in the tradition of the rejection of miracles.

We, as 21st century Christians and followers of an entire tradition built on, not one, but several miracles, must deal with this Enlightenment inheritance. We either reject the scientific revolution and embrace the miraculous at the expense of the greatest advancement of knowledge in known history by science; or we reject the miraculous at the expense of the foundations of our faith. What are we to do when faced with Resurrections, mystical appearances, and Ascensions, all of which happened in full view of witnesses?

One of the ways I resolve this for myself is to remember that, as human beings, we have limited knowledge of the ways of the universe, and if we believe in such a thing, the ways of God. We are like children with flashlights in the attic of a huge mansion. A flashlight illuminates whatever is within the beam of its light, and we, the children in the attic of Creation, imagine that what we see within that narrow beam comprises the whole of what is in the attic. But the ways of the universe and the ways of God are way beyond what we are capable of knowing or even seeing; there is much beyond the beam of light. When we do see things outside the beams of the flashlight, we have no context in which to fit them. Many of these events, things, beings function in realities beyond our own, have lives and histories of

their own, and sometimes, we get to see into and even experience those realities. These alternate realities, I suggest, are the realm of the miraculous.

Human beings, in this view, are the halfway point between Creation, the material world, which we know very little about, and the Divine, spiritual world, which we know even less about. It is at that halfway point, that island of perception and knowing between worlds, which our disciples stand today as they witness Jesus' Ascension.

Like the Resurrection, it's worth asking "*what is an Ascension*"? We've been talking over the last few weeks about other miraculous events, so we're already in the realm of the unusual, the unexplained, and the weird. And ascensions are very weird. The other ascension in the Bible is when Elijah is "*carried away*" in front of Elisha (2 Kings 2:11). Elijah and Elisha stand near a river and Elijah is giving Elisha instruction on taking over his role as prophet. Then, a chariot of fire with horses of fire swoops down and carries Elijah into "*heaven in a whirlwind*". The word for chariot in Hebrew is *merkaba*. Ezekiel may be describing something like this chariot in his vision of counter-rotating circles carried by four winged creatures (Ez 1:4-14). In Jesus' Ascension, he is carried up into heaven, possibly in the same vehicle as Elijah, perhaps in this strange construction from Ezekiel.

In early Christian artwork, Jesus' Ascension takes place in a blue sphere filled with stars, lifted by four angels. The early Christians, then, also connected Elijah and Ezekiel's vision to understand this moment in the life of Jesus.

As you can see, we are now deep into the weird, the strange and the miraculous. We are being translated into a very unusual reality from the one we experience day to day. We are, in a way, by the very reading of these words, being ascended by the strange vehicle of language into the mystical orientation of the very first disciples of Jesus. We are, like Elijah, and Ezekiel, and Jesus, being transported from one way of being to another. Perhaps, by gathering together in this way, with one another to share in the fellowship and sacraments of the church, we are climbing into the transport vehicle, the *merkaba*, of Christ.

One way to read the story of Jesus is to track the transitions from one way of being to another. The Ascension is Jesus' third great transition. First, Jesus transitions to this earthly world in the Incarnation, his birth and all the miracles that surround that, at the beginning of Luke. He hints at what is to come in the Transfiguration in the middle of Luke's Gospel. Then he transitions into death, which really isn't a great transition at all, since we all die. But the transition into the Resurrection is a big deal. Isn't it? It is his second great transition, or translation of being and happens almost at the end of the Gospel. And then the third great transition, the one hinted at in the Transfiguration, is Jesus' Ascension, the very end of Luke's Gospel.

Since we are now deep into the mystical and mysterious and miraculous, let's kick it up a bit. I have just described Jesus' translation from one form of being to another, the taking on of different bodies through the course of his life - a fully physical body in his material existence, a Resurrection body during his appearances following the Resurrection, and now a ... what... a Light body? in the Ascension.

Throughout the New Testament, we are described as children of light by Jesus and the disciples. In the Old Testament, we are told we are in the form of God in our Creation (Gen 2), and are created just a little lower than the angels themselves (Ps 36). Perhaps, and this is just one interpretation of what is going on here, perhaps Jesus' life is a roadmap for our lives, and perhaps Jesus is showing us what it means to grow closer to God, not just in this life, but all our lives, all our ways of being.

The temptation is to let God and Christ do everything for us. Because I am adopted by Christ into the life of God, I don't have to do anything to further my different ways of being in this world. This is essentially the theological approach taken by many of our spiritual ancestors in the Puritan tradition. To do any work with regard to our spiritual advancement is to discredit the work of God within us.

But the problem with this mindset is that *we don't do anything with the gifts we have been given*, and we ignore the clear indication that Jesus is showing us a path which requires the rigorous application of our entire being in order to achieve the summit of said path. It is work to climb that path. And what is the summit of the path?

The ancient church called that summit *theosis*, or becoming one with God, becoming God-like. Or a better way to put it might be from Peter's second letter. There, he says of transitioning from the body of incarnation to the body of light,

*His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promise, that through these you may escape from the corruption that is in the world (the body of incarnation) because of passion, and become **partakers of the divine nature** (the body of light). (2 Pet 1:3-4)*

My point with this whole consideration of the Ascension is quite simply this:

What if the Ascension is the culmination of the path that Jesus has laid out for each one of us?

And what if the image, the transformation, we are called to in our faith lives is to move from the body of incarnation, the body of matter, to the body of light, the body that matters?

And what if the vehicle, the merkaba, we have been given is right here before us in this thing we call church?

Perhaps, things like the sacrament of communion, or the sacrament of baptism, are part of the engine of the vehicle that transports, transmutes, transforms, translates us from one way of being to another.

The Ascension, with the Incarnation and the Resurrection, is indeed a mystery. But it is also an invitation. It is an invitation to become the impossible by doing the impossible, an invitation to become a partaker in the community of God and Christ and the Holy Spirit. To literally participate in the creative, loving, thriving community of God with God.

This is why the disciples leave the Ascension filled with joy. Before, when Jesus was telling the disciples he was leaving - and when he did leave and die - the disciples were filled

with despair, anxiety. After Jesus' death and before the resurrection, there is the *confirmation of Death*.

Now, after the Resurrection, when Jesus leaves, when Jesus ascends, the disciples are filled with joy and the desire to worship God. After the Ascension, there is the *confirmation of eternal Life*.

This is why the Ascension is also an invitation. The Ascension is not just about Jesus; it is about you and I and who we are becoming in our lives with Christ and through the Holy Spirit. *God became man, so we might become God*, as St. Augustine said; or to put it in the language of the letter to the Colossians,

For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, appears, then you also will appear (ascend) with him in glory. (Col 3:3-4)

Or again, in John's first letter,

Little children, you are of God, and have overcome them; for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world (4:4) ... In this is love perfected with us, that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so we are in this world (4:17)

Or, when Paul wrote to the Corinthians in his second letter, he said,

And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into this likeness (image) with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:18; NIV)

Take a moment here and reflect on all of this.

Can you feel the power of this, that we are children of light and are called to follow Jesus into that same Ascension he also experienced, just as we also share Jesus' baptism and the sharing of his body and blood at the Last Supper?

Can you also feel the danger of this, that we, as ones who are becoming like God, even as were created to be, can use this light, this power to the great destruction of self and church alike?

Like the disciples, do you respond to this vision of not only who Jesus is but who we are becoming with the desire to bless one another and to be blessed by the vision of Ascension, and to worship God with joy?

We are now so deep into the mystery, I am sure you have forgotten that we began this discussion with a brief journey into ideas about the miraculous and the Enlightenment and David Hume.

Do you see now that when we engage the mystical, the mysterious, and the miraculous, it doesn't even matter if the thing is 'real' or 'true' or even 'believable'?

Because the fact of the matter is that you and I are here now, having chosen to enter the merkaba of this particular place of worship and blessing to share in the joy of the Lord together. Just by doing so, we are already more filled with light, and becoming more like Christ. This, all this, is the vehicle of our light bodies. Even now, even here.

And that is the miracle of Ascension. Amen.