
My Sermon from Sunday May 16, 2021, Easter 7, 'Ascension Sunday' ~ "Jesus Went To Heaven"

I speak to you in the name of the ascended Christ. Amen.

'The Ascension of The Lord' is an important day in Finland. It happens to be a national holiday and everyone knows the meaning behind it. My 5 year old granddaughter Elli, who lives in Kempele Finland, told me this on a *FaceTime* call this week: "Nana, at Ascension Jesus went to heaven."

Elli, you are right. On **Ascension Day** which is always 40 days after **Easter Sunday**, the **Day of the Resurrection**, the risen Christ has completed his earthly ministry and he ascends to the throne of heaven to rule over all things as Lord.

And how did this happen? This is part of the mystery of our faith. In his gospel Luke writes this description:

"While Jesus was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven."
Luke 23:51

And in the Acts of the Apostle, Luke writes a similar description of the ascension:

"As they were watching, Jesus was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight." Acts 1:9

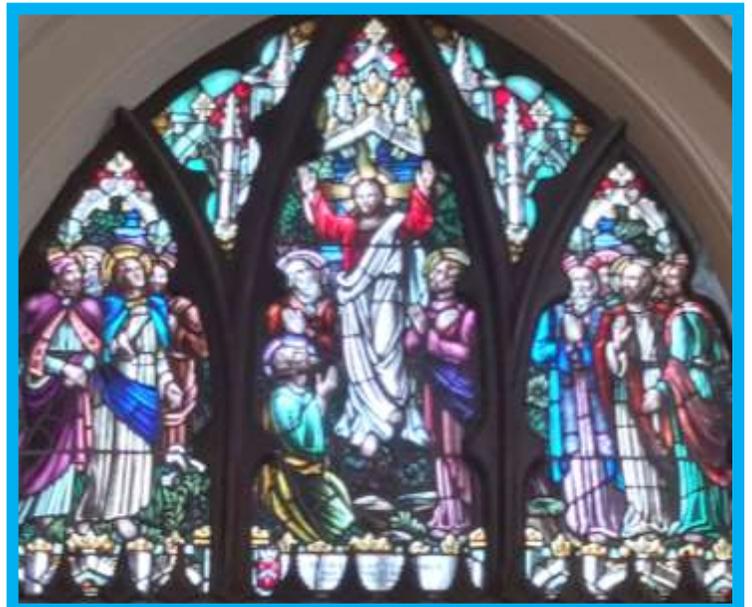
This description sounds incredulous to us, doesn't it? The risen Christ going straight up like a comet or an Apollo spacecraft! And where did he go, into outer space?

Now stained glass windows in churches, including one in our sanctuary (right), portray the Ascension in the same literal way that Luke describes: Jesus is lifted up into the air while his disciples look up at him.

I understand why the event was described this way by the disciples and this narrative was told to Luke. Luke was not there at the Ascension but he did travel with Paul on his missionary journeys.

Here's what we know ~ The risen Christ had a physical body and he appeared to his believers several times during the 40 days between the Day of the Resurrection and the Ascension. At the end of the 40 days, the risen Christ goes to heaven and he is not seen on earth again. Instead, he has promised to be with us until the end of time.

So how did the Ascension work? In those days when it was believed that the earth was flat, the world was understood to operate in 3 tiers or "layers." The earth was sandwiched in between heaven up high and hell down below. People would look up to heaven and down into the darkness of eternal life without God. That imagery has continued over 2,000 years later. For example, we often look up when thinking about God in heaven.



We do know that when we are filled with God's love and **JOY**, we do feel lighter and we find ourselves lifted up.

If you believed that Jesus is right above us in heaven and you were asked to describe the Ascension you would do the same as Luke did and write about it in the same way as Luke. Jesus was lifted up. Jesus was carried up.

Luke also uses this image: ***“A cloud took Jesus out of their sight.”*** Acts 1:9

We know from Bible imagery that a cloud signifies the presence of God. It is in the presence of God that Jesus ascended to the throne of heaven.



When we sing: ***“And he will raise you up on eagles’ wings,”*** we are thinking of God lifting up our souls. That is exactly what we mean, but we don't mean this in a literal way.

We know much more about science and the laws of God in creation in 2021 than we did in the year 33 AD. However, I still can't describe how the risen Christ moved from this dimension into the heavenly dimension. Was it through a black hole? I have no idea how eternity is reached from this finite world. I do know that heaven according to scripture is a place. Jesus said, ***“I go to prepare a place for you.”*** (John 14:2)

We do know that Jesus gave a final message to the disciples and then he wasn't with them any longer.

In the 4th century, people still believed in the 3-tiered universe and St. Augustine, in his prolific writings, used language such as looking up into heaven, and rising to heaven. However, he understands the theology and the significance of the Ascension.

Here is how St. Augustine described the meaning of the Ascension when he wrote these words around 400 AD:

*Having fasted for forty days in preparation for Easter, we rejoiced for another forty days after. The first forty ended with the feast of the Resurrection, and the second forty ended with today's great solemnity of the Ascension, on which our Savior deprives us of his visible presence — without, however, ceasing to dwell with us. While he was physically in our midst, he was not separated from his Father; likewise, now that he has returned to his Father, he's not separated from us. Far from deserting us like strangers, he remains with us and lives in our midst, as he personally reassures us: **“Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid.... I am going away, but I will come back to you.”***

Therefore, Jesus is living among us, consoling those who suffer anguish and pain, helping those in danger, assisting the unfortunate and the afflicted. I repeat: Jesus is with us, present

not only in our labors but also in our words and our thoughts. Scrutinizing and fathoming our very heart, he sees what our senses, our hands and our minds beget.

St. Augustine's theme is that heaven is now open to us. And he writes about the mystery of the **Trinity**. We know, however, that Jesus was never separated from his Father — even when dwelling among us. Though visiting earth, he didn't leave heaven.

At the Ascension, Jesus speaks with authority and reminds us to wait and to be patient. We will receive power from God to do God's work here on earth. That applied then and that applies today.

In my role as Archdeacon, I am often called upon to be a mediator with other parishes. I always pray that God will use me as bridge to reconciliation and to healing. Jesus is our bridge to heaven. He has opened heaven's door for all believers. In the words of an **Ascension Hymn**,
"O Lord Most High, Eternal King" ~

*O Lord most high,
eternal king,
by thee redeemed
thy praise we sing.
The bonds of death
are burst by thee,
and grace has won
the victory.*

Amen.

Archdeacon Deborah+

