

“A Little Attention for the Ascension”
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Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53

The Feast of the Ascension is a sort of way-station in Eastertide, forty days after Jesus’ resurrection and ten days before Pentecost, when we celebrate the descent of the Holy Spirit, an event that launched the mission of the Church. As such, the Ascension doesn’t get a lot of attention. You almost feel sorry for it, because you feel like it deserves better. It’s not every day that someone is lifted bodily into the heavens, but the Ascension gets no tree or presents or bright lights, no bunnies or eggs or lilies. Good luck even finding a Hallmark card for Ascension Day. And it doesn’t even happen in prime-time. It’s stuck on a Thursday, with no hope of competing with its big brothers, Easter and Pentecost.

However, it seems from scripture that this is precisely how we’re meant to treat this day. We are not meant dwell on it or make a big deal of it, which is very different from ignoring it entirely, as most people do. The whole thing is summed up in a handful of verses. Matthew, Mark, and John don’t even mention the ascension in their gospels. It’s a Luke exclusive! And in Luke’s account, Jesus seems much more concerned with what will happen next. “So stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” That’s a veiled reference to the arrival of the Holy Spirit, and then the Ascension just happens, almost as an afterthought.

Luke revisits the Ascension at the very beginning of his blockbuster sequel, The Acts of the Apostles. As the disciples gaze upward, watching Jesus float off on a cloud, two angels come up and ask, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” “This Jesus,” they continued, “who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you

saw him go into heaven.” In other words, he’ll come back someday, but in the meantime, what are you doing gawping at the sky?

It’s clear from both passages that Jesus wants the disciples’ attention firmly fixed, not on the Ascension, but on what will happen next: in the immediate future, the descent of the Holy Spirit, and eventually Jesus’ return in glory on the same clouds that lifted him up to heaven. It’s not clear why the Ascension seems to be treated almost as an afterthought, but we can surmise a few things, because the event’s not isolated. It’s embedded within a much larger witness, and that witness reveals to us that we need to stop thinking of God as being “up there” and start thinking of God as being “down here” and “in here.”

That’s the whole point of Jesus becoming incarnate in human form, to give us a revelation of God that we could understand. Jesus’ descent was also meant to give us a chance to participate in the revelation, to become part of it in a new and unique way. That’s what it means to be the Church: to be part of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. As Paul wrote to the Ephesians, Jesus has been placed over all things “for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.”

To put it plainly, God wants us to accept that heaven isn’t a place in the way we normally think of places. God does not dwell “over there,” someplace separate from us, popping in to visit from time to time. Rather God dwells where God chooses, which could be anywhere, including inside us and among us. That’s why the Spirit’s descent was the focus, not the ascent of the body. That’s why the return of Jesus was so much more important, in the angels’ eyes, than the extraordinary sight the disciples had just witnessed.

Of course, that brings up the question of why God bothered with the Ascension at all. Well, first off, Jesus needed a way home, and by ascending to heaven in the flesh, it was one

more way of showing how Jesus really was the Messiah. Second, Jesus needed to clear out to give the disciples a chance, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to become the Body of Christ on Earth. And third, the Ascension was a sign to all who follow Jesus that they too will someday ascend, not exactly as Jesus did, but in way that reunites us fully with God.

You see, disciples, followers of Jesus, do just that. They follow. We follow Jesus' teaching as best we can. We follow him into death by dying to our sinful selves, so that we can be reborn anew day by day. And so it stands to reason that just as his resurrection culminated in his return to God, so we, too, who are faithful, have the hope of someday, like Jesus, returning to God.

So, yes, the Ascension of Jesus has intrinsic significance. We see where Jesus goes, and we know that by grace we may someday follow. But on the whole, Ascension isn't meant to be lingered upon. Instead, we wait, like the disciples did, for the spiritual power to spread the good news as we both await and participate in the fulfillment of the God's purposes. As we celebrate the Ascension, we do so because it is a true outlier, in that Jesus is going up to God, whereas most of the time, the focus is how God comes down for us to reveal just how much we are loved, and that lifts us up. Amen.