



Christ Ascended into Heaven
By Bill Lawson

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*"Ascension"
by John Singleton Copley*

We celebrate the Ascension of Jesus as the completion of his transformation from the One in whom dwelt “all the fulness of the Godhead bodily”¹ to the One who “filleth all in all.”² But he didn’t leave us behind. Christ remains within and among us through the Holy Spirit, and includes us all in the Church Universal, “which is his body, the fullness of [the One] that filleth all in all.”³

During the forty days after the Resurrection, Jesus appeared in many forms. Since the Ascension, Christ continued to appear in different ways in the Bible. Throughout the history of the church, many have reported various types of visual apparitions of Jesus. Most Christians can testify that we have experienced some sort of spiritual

connection with the risen Christ. Methodism commemorates John Wesley’s Aldersgate Experience, about which he wrote,

I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.⁴

The Ascension is quite a mystery.

And it came to pass, while he blessed them, he was parted from them, and carried up into heaven. (*Luke 24:51 KJV*)

Jesus appeared to many of his friends, and apparently *only* his friends, during the forty days between the Resurrection and the Ascension. Paul reported that one appearance was to over five hundred people. Sometimes, like when he appeared behind closed doors on the evening of the Resurrection and the week after, he was completely recognizable, including the wounds in his hands and feet and side.⁵ Other times, like on the road to Emmaus, he was only recognized “in the breaking of the bread.”⁶ Mary Magdalene recognized him when he called her name.⁷

The Bible also reports several appearances Jesus made after the Ascension, including to Stephen during his martyrdom,⁸ to Paul on the Damascus Road,⁹ and to John on Patmos.¹⁰ Many other Christians through the ages have testified to the appearances of Jesus. Perhaps these post-Ascension appearances have been mostly within the context of visions and dreams, yet they have seemed real enough to be recognizable and convincing to those who have been blessed by them. And, in many cases, people have had profound results having acted in response to their encounters with Christ.

The literal actions reported in the Ascension event are limited to his parting words and

blessing, his elevation from the ground to an unspecified distance before being hidden from view by surrounding clouds, and the appearance of angels closing the event. The brevity of the reports suggests a significant metaphorical element to the Ascension.

Adding to the mystery is the difference in perspective from the beginning of time until a few hundred years ago on the shape and position of the Earth in the cosmos, when people began to realize the Earth is round. *Up* is also *out*, so the idea of Heaven as a geographical location somewhere in a plottable territory above the Earth seems far less likely than the concept Paul described on Mars Hill that “in [God], we live and move and have our being.”¹¹ Jesus alluded to the immediate presence of Heaven from the beginning of his preaching ministry, declaring, “Behold, the kingdom of God is within you” as phrased in the King James Version, or “among you” as in the New Revised Standard Version.¹²

The Ascension reported in the New Testament was visible to those who were present, yet the event presented as literal is also a metaphor for a spiritual ascension whereby all earthly limitations were dissipated. Another aspect of the Ascension, similar to that of monarchs ascending to their thrones at their coronations, is affirmed in the imagery of the Bible and in the ancient creeds of the Church. The Apostles’ Creed says that Jesus “sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.”¹³ Through the spatial picture this imagery paints in our minds, the impression communicated to our souls is that Christ and Christ’s divine law of universal love is the ultimate authority, extending throughout all eternal existence, visible and invisible.

We are part of the spiritual body of Christ.

[God] hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fulness of [the one] that filleth all in all.
(*Ephesians 1:22-23 KJV*)

We can only begin to imagine the proposition in this affirmation of Christ as filling “all in all,” the One who as phrased in the Living Bible Translation, is “the Author and Giver of everything everywhere.”¹⁴ Yet, this is tantamount to God loving the whole world so much as to send Jesus to be our savior. It stretches the capacity of the human mind and heart to comprehend a consciousness and love inclusive of all existence. Moreover, Ephesians goes on to say that we have been “raised up together, and [that Christ has] made us [to] sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus.”¹⁵

The Ascension inherently includes an invitation to discovery. Discovery begins at birth. It is so exciting to see newborns become aware of their hands and feet. We gradually explore and learn more about ourselves, our environment, other people, and the world. One of the most fulfilling things about relationships is discovering more about the people we love. Similarly, we grow spiritually, discovering more about Christ as that relationship grows. We will continue the process throughout this life and the life of the world to come, as Ephesians goes on to reveal,

Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect [person], unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ:¹⁶

We are empowered to become all God created us to be.

But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth. (*Acts 1:8 KJV*)

The Ascension as described in the Bible includes three major promises made to the disciples who were present, and through them to the whole Church for all the ages to come. First, Jesus reiterated his promise to send the Holy Spirit who would empower them and us. Second, Jesus promised that they and we would become witnesses for Christ throughout the world. Third, the two [people] who suddenly appeared in white apparel after Jesus disappeared from their sight promised that “this same Jesus”¹⁷ would return in the same way he left.

“Ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you,”¹⁸ Jesus said in Acts. Luke also records the instruction, “Tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high.”¹⁹ The rest of the New Testament pretty much focuses on the results of this empowerment by the Holy Spirit after she was poured out ten days later on the Day of Pentecost, as described in Acts chapter two. The same Spirit who had been prominent throughout the Old Testament for her empowerment of humanity from the time she “moved upon the face of the waters”²⁰ at Creation was now to be poured out “on all flesh”²¹ as had been predicted by the prophet Joel. The Holy Spirit continues to empower us to love as Christ loves, and to carry on the mission of Jesus.

The word “witnesses” does some heavy lifting in this passage as it pertains to this endless mission of the Church Universal. Jesus stated his six-fold mission at the beginning of his earthly ministry as he read from Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord.²²

He concluded his earthly ministry with the Great Commission,

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.²³

Everything Jesus said and did during his earthly ministry is encompassed in those words, “Ye shall be witnesses unto me... unto the uttermost part of the earth.” The history of the Church is the history of that promise being fulfilled all over the world from

one generation to the next, sometimes gloriously and sometimes not so much. We each are a part of the unfolding of this promise. We are not expected to be witnesses of what *other people* have experienced. We are expected to be witnesses to what *we* are experiencing. Like Christendom at large, we sometimes do pretty well and sometimes fail miserably. Still, we have within us and among us the Holy Spirit, empowering us to keep learning how to love and providing us with spiritual gifts.

“Christ will come again,” we affirm “as we proclaim the mystery of faith” in our Communion ritual,²⁴ and in the ancient creeds of the church. Christ comes to us in many different ways each day, in addition to the Parousia Paul described in 1 Thessalonians,

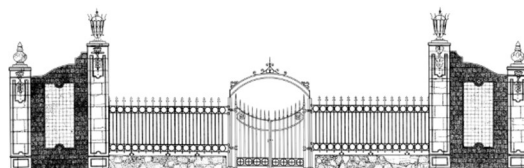
For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words.²⁵

Conclusion

The Ascension marks the end of one chapter for Christianity and the beginning of the next. We all have these transition points in our lives, both personally and collectively, where we finish what we were doing and start doing something else. Usually, they are far less dramatic than the Resurrection and Ascension, and other events in the life of Christ, but they still tend to be very significant and transformative.

The Ascension for the first Christians marked the expansion of Christ’s mission from himself to all of us and to everyone else in the whole world who would ever come to believe in his vision for humanity, then and now, and forever.

In the Name of Jesus, Amen.



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Manuscript of the sermon preached by Rev. Bill Lawson on May 21, 2023, at [Briensburg UMC](#)
Bible Readings for Ascension & Heritage Sunday, Revised Common Lectionary
Acts 1:1-11; Psalm 93; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53

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Notes

¹ Colossians 2:9 (KJV).

² Ephesians 1:23 (KJV).

³ Ibid.

⁴ John Wesley. "Entry for May 24, 1738." *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M. in Four Vols, Vol. I.* London: J.M. Dent & Co., 1907. Digitized by the Internet Archive, 2017. [Web](#). 15 May 2023.

⁵ John 20:19-29.

⁶ Luke 24:13-35 (NRSV).

⁷ John 20:16.

⁸ Acts 7:54-60.

⁹ Acts 9:1-22.

¹⁰ Revelation 1:9-18.

¹¹ Acts 17:28.

¹² Luke 17:21 (KJV, NRSV).

¹³ The United Methodist Church. "The Apostles Creed, Traditional Version." *The United Methodist Hymnal*, No. 881. Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989. Print.

¹⁴ Ephesians 1:23 (KJV, TLB).

¹⁵ Ephesians 2:6 (KJV).

¹⁶ Ephesians 4:13 (KJV).

¹⁷ Acts 1:11 (KJV).

¹⁸ Acts 1:8 (KJV).

¹⁹ Luke 24:49 (KJV).

²⁰ Genesis 1:2 (KJV).

²¹ Acts 2:16 (KJV).

²² Luke 4:18-19 (KJV).

²³ Matthew 28:19-20 (KJV).

²⁴ The United Methodist Church. "Service of Word and Table I." *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, p. 38. Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992. Print.

²⁵ 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18 (KJV).

